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October 7, 1890.

No. 689.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXVII.



THERE WAS A FEARFUL CRASH AND A SHIVERING OF GLASS, AS THE ROOF-SPY PLUNGED BODILY THROUGH INTO THE CRACKSMAN'S DEN.

OR,
WORKING OUT THE MYSTERY
OF TWO LIVES.

A Story of Signal Sam's Protege.

BY LIEUTENANT A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "WARBLING WILLIAM," "JOLLY
JEREMIAH," "COWBOY GID," "BILDAD
BARNACLE," THE "TEXAS TOM-
CAT" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE GYPSY CAMP.

"A BRIGHT night, Billy! So bright it makes
me nervous!"

It was a girl, or rather young woman, who
spoke, and she drew in her breath with a gasp-
ing sound as she turned her black eyes toward

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the scintillant stars—a brown-faced, round-limbed creature, with a savage beauty that was in keeping with her surroundings.

Her companion was of altogether a different type. He was only a boy, apparently, though the serious cast of his features belied his seeming youth. His garments were of a somewhat fantastic pattern, for he wore a peaked cap, and a cloak, scarlet in color and mediæval in cut. In stature he was a dwarf,* and was known as Baldor, the Pigmy.

"What do you mean, Nell?" he asked, eyeing her sharply. "Why should the night make you nervous?"

"Oh, you can't understand it, I s'pose, seeing that you're on'y part Romany, if you're Romany at all!" with a shrug of her graceful shoulders. "This kind of a night makes me wild. If I could jist fly off with the wind and wander the world over, without once stoppin', I think I'd be happier."

There was enough in her life and surroundings to make her wish to fly from them, but Billy knew it was not these with which she was dissatisfied. It was only the roving, Romany instinct bubbling and seething in her vagabond blood, that glorious night.

Beyond them lay the ragged outlines of a great city—one of those marvelous western cities that seemingly spring up, like Jonah's gourd, in a night. The light from its gas and electric lamps, and its red-throated furnaces, filled the heavens above with an unearthly glare. But this hot and garish glow could not quench the brilliancy of the stars; nor could the city odors quite steal the cool sweetness from the kissing wind.

Like a hungry outcast longing to be near comforts that were denied, the Gypsy camp had crept close to the city limits, and was hugging the filthy alleys of the poorer quarter. It was not an extensive camp. There were only three or four shabby tents, and some half-dozen decrepit wagons with dirty canvas stretched over them.

Near one of the latter were the speakers:—Billy Baldor squatted on an upturned bucket, and the girl erect, with brown face skyward.

Not far away was a camp-fire, over which an old woman was bending; and scattered about was the usual complement of shiftless men, romping children, and mangy dogs.

"I feel that way, sometimes, when things don't go right," and Billy removed his cap and thoughtfully contemplated its peaked point. "So, I think I understand you, Nell. As to whether I'm Romany or not, I wish to goodness I knew! It wouldn't do me any good, probably, but there's some satisfaction in just knowing for certain who and what I am. I'm just a floating chip, blown about by every wind, with neither starting point nor destination."

Her companion's words and tone were entirely too thoughtful and serious for the mercurial Gypsy girl, and she showed her displeasure by a toss of her head and a shake of her midnight hair.

Then the talk turned toward the city, and for an hour they discussed the dwellers and toilers of the heated streets and stifling houses.

"Ah, there comes Pepper Smith!"

Nell stopped short in a bitter diatribe against the wealthy denizens of the trading marks, and pointed a brown finger toward the nearest alley.

"As he is coming 'pecially to see you, havin' heard of your wonderful powers, I'd better make myself scarce!"

There was indescribable irony thrown into the word "wonderful," and it was thus plain that the girl placed scant reliance on the fortune-telling powers usually attributed to her people, for Billy, since joining the band, had become noted for his forecasts.

"Leave him to me," said the boy. "I'll tell him things he never dreamed of."

The camp had quieted some time before. Many of the Gypsies had wandered away to the town and the others had retired for the night. So that, when the girl had lightly withdrawn, except for the prowling and sniffing dogs, Billy seemed the only occupant.

The individual called by the girl Pepper Smith came from the alley with a shuffling tread, and many wary glances about to see that his movements were not noted. There was little that was attractive about him, when viewed from a distance, and when he came closer that little became less.

He was past fifty, with a shaggy head and brutal brows, and shoulders that seemed to be

rounded and stooped from his constant crouching attitude. His face was liberally sprinkled with gunpowder marks, a fact which accounted for his title of "Pepper."

The Pigmy had never seen him before, though he had had many accounts and descriptions of him from the girl, and he therefore surveyed him narrowly as he advanced. Pepper was well known to the Gypsies of this particular band; and for many reasons, as will appear in the progress of this story.

"Evenin'!" he accosted, pulling at his hat as he came within speaking distance. "You're Billy Baldor, I take it. The ole man said you'd be waitin' fer me."

"Yes; and you're Pepper Smith."

The fellow started.

"That ain't part of the fortune-tellin', now, I reckon? Shucks, no! Greg's tole you all about me."

He plucked a splinter from the wagon-box and nervously chewed it, as he glanced furtively about the tents.

"He isn't here."

"Who ain't hyer?" and again the rascal started.

"Why, Greg! That's who you were thinking about. You forget I'm a fortune-teller. Come back here, where we can't be seen."

The proposition appeared to give Pepper a feeling of greater security, and he quietly followed Baldor to the rear of the wagon, where a temporary shelter had been constructed of canvas and poles.

"Yes, I've been waiting for you," remarked Baldor, lighting a small hand-lamp. "I knew you'd come to-night."

"Greg tole you that!" Pepper asserted, eyeing the lamp uneasily. "What's the use o' that thing?"

"The lamp? Oh, you needn't be afraid; no one can see through this canvas."

"Who said anything 'bout bein' afraid? 'Tain't that! I don't keer 'bout everbody knowin' I come down hyer to git my fortune told. 'Specially the boys!"

He stopped with a jerk, as if suddenly realizing he was speaking of things that might not be uttered.

"A dollar!" demanded the boy, throwing back his scarlet cloak and extending a hand for the coin. "I can't work without pay, you know. You don't, I'm sure; and nobody does."

"There it is," drawing a silver piece from his pocket. "That ought to pay for a good fortune, I'm thinkin'!"

"We'll see about that as we go along," the Pigmy returned. "I don't make the fortunes, you understand; I only tell what is going to happen. It may be good or bad; but for that I'm not responsible."

"Certainly!" and Pepper's face took on a look of keen interest; his very attitude, as he leaned toward the dwarf, showing the deep superstition of his nature.

"You've heard I can tell fortunes," said Billy, taking the hand of the man and closely scanning the horny palm, "but you'll feel surer of it—know it, in fact—if I tell you something of the past. One might pretend to tell the future, without knowing anything about it, but he has to know the past to tell that."

Pepper breathed hard as his gaze was riveted by Billy's keen eyes.

"In the first place, you've led a pretty tough life, Pepper! And you've been mixed up in a number of things, which, if they were known, would cause you to do time in a certain institution I shall not name."

"There have been some bright spots in your life, too. You had a wife once, and a child. But, that was years ago. You tried to travel a straight path, then, Pepper, but you fell into bad company, began to drink, and ended by driving your wife to suicide. And, then, your child died; and Satan has been navigating your craft pretty much ever since."

Pepper compressed his lips and a spasmodic twitching of his features was visible to the sharp-eyed boy.

"But, that isn't the worst, Pepper; though it don't seem that anything could be much worse. Two years ago you killed a certain man for his money—"

"Stop! Stop!" yelled the rascal. Putting up his free hand as if he would push the vision from him. "That's a lie! I never done anything of the kind!"

Billy felt the hand he held in his tremble like a wind-blown leaf.

"Just as you say, Pepper. If you've had enough of the past, we'll turn to the future. Maybe it'll be pleasanter!"

"But I tell you it's a lie!" Pepper insisted.

"You're a-mixin' somebody else's fortune with mine. I never done anything of the kind. But if I had—if I'd killed forty, do ye think I want you to go to blabbin' it that way?"

"Nobody can hear me," purred the Pygmy. "Perhaps I did mix you with somebody else. We'll let it go, if you insist I was wrong. I feel sure those other statements were correct, though!"

"And, now, if you please, we'll turn to the future!"

He studied the palm for a moment, and again transfixed Pepper with his burning eyes.

"I don't like to tell you what I saw there, Pepper. You may say I'm lying again. But, there's trouble ahead for you, if you don't change your course."

"What kind?" Pepper growled. "See hyer, young man! I didn't come hyer to git lectured. But to have my fortune told!"

Baldor bowed his peaked cap in acknowledgment of the correctness of the criticism.

"What do you want me to tell you about? You're not in love, Pepper!"

"Shucks, no!" the fellow snorted. "But I'm thinkin' 'bout 'gagin' in a certain p'ticklar piece of business, an' I want you to tell me whether or not I'll have good luck in it."

"Better drop it, Pepper, if it's anything scaly; and from what I can see I think it is."

"An' that's the best fortune you can give me?" the scoundrel growled. "Well, all I can say is, I'd 'a' done better if I'd 'a' gone to Gran. She's tole my fortune, on an' off, for twenty years an' more; an' they've always been good fortunes, an' have come out right."

With this explosion he picked up his hat and hurried out into the night.

CHAPTER II.

FATHER AND SON.

THE individual spoken of as "Greg," was the chief of the Gypsy band, if so loosely constructed a society can be said to have a chief. He was known as Gregory Button. Gran, or Granny, Button, the old woman seen bending over the campfire while Nell and Billy talked, was his wife. The girl's name was also said to be Button, though it was known to every member of the band that she was in no wise related to Gregory.

Billy Baldor had stated to Pepper Smith that Greg was not in the camp. This was true. At the first coming of twilight the Gypsy had set out for a certain point in the city. He picked his way along very lazily at first, but when the shadows deepened he increased his gait, and soon stood in front of a brightly-lighted business house.

The streets were crowded at that hour, a constant tide of humanity setting along the pavements in each direction. Crouched in an angle of the wall Greg watched the surging throng, his greedy eyes lighting evilly whenever they caught the glint of gold or the flash of jewels.

He was a typical Romany, negligent of dress, and with bushy, black hair and beard, and swarthy skin. His face betokened a nature crafty and treacherous, disingenuous and given to vengeful malignity.

After a few minutes spent thus he crept around the building and approaching a rear door rapped on it lightly with his knuckle.

The knock was answered by a young man, who frowned slightly when his gaze fell on the Romany.

"I'm very busy," he said, "can't you call at another time?"

"I must see you, my dear!" Greg whined, placing his hand appealingly in front of his body. "I thought you'd be glad to see me! Let's see! How long has it been?"

The young man was not proof against this assault, and led the way into an inner room, separated from the business portions of the building.

"I knew you were in town," he stated, motioning Greg to a chair and occupying another.

"Nell was up here this morning."

"And she never told me a word about it!" the Romany asserted, with a wag of his head.

"That girl is an ungrateful and useless piece of furniture."

The contrast between the two men as they thus sat facing each other was great, and no one would even have guessed them to be father and son. The young man was somewhat dark of face, but his skin had a clear and healthy appearance, and his eye was truthful and bright. His clothing was neat and tasteful, though quiet, and his manner denoted the energetic and prosperous young man of business.

"You want money?" he asked. "You haven't

* Those who have read "Signal Sam, the Lookout Scout," will readily remember the Pigmy.

"the proposition I made the last time you were here, I hope."

"To settle me down in this pen you call a city, where I would die for a breath of air? No, I ha'n't forgot it, Nick; but, jist the same, I don't intend to accept."

"How would the country do, then, fether?" the young man questioned. "I'm willing to supply you with all you need, if only you will cast off these vagabonds you're associating with and quit your rowing."

"I don't like to argy. It ain't in the Gypsy line, Nick, as you ought to know. Gimme some money, an' we'll do the argyin' some other time."

"But first, I want to ask you a question: Do you know anything of a boy, or rather a dwarf, that calls hisself Billy Baldor? He's with us, now, an' goes ahead of anything in the fortunetellin' line we've ever had. I half suspect he ain't a Romany at all, though he can sling Zingari like he was born to it. He's on'y been with us about two weeks; an' he's took in a mint of money in that time tellin' fortunes."

The young man shook his head.

"Never heard of him. But that isn't answerin' my question."

"Well, I ain't ready to answer it, yit. Can't be but one answer, though, an' that's 'no.' I love money. No one loves it better, as you should know, Nick. But I'm not going to jail myself to git it. Seems to me I've done enough for you to earn all you've got, anyway, an' twice over."

"Yes, you have!" and the young man's features softened. "I forget that at times. You must overlook it when I do. If it hadn't been for you I'd have been no better than the rest of them. I owe it all to you, as you say; and you can have what money you want so long as I have it to give."

Greg Button rubbed his greasy palms together, and further announced his satisfaction at this decision by drawing his tongue backward and forward in his mouth in a clicking way.

"I knowed you wouldn't go back on me, Nick!" he chuckled. "I knowed you wouldn't. An' I'll stand by you, should you ever need it. With a Romany, Nick, blood is always thicker than water. It ain't that way with this new world of yours, but it's that way with the Romany."

This announcement seemed to give the old Gypsy much satisfaction, though it had little apparent effect on the youth.

"An' there's another thing, Nick! I've been doin' all I could to help out in that little scheme of yours."

The young man stared.

"I don't understand."

At this Greg again drew his greasy palms together and made the disgusting clicking sound with his tongue.

"Why, that little matrimony venture! She's a purty one, Nick, an' rich as cream. I've been a watchin' her fer yel!"

The red color mounted like a tide to the young man's forehead.

"That will do, father!" he declared, sternly. "I didn't suppose you had ever heard of Margaret Crofton."

"Why, I'm a fortune-teller, Nick!" continued the old scoundrel, gleefully, in spite of the warning. "I've been layin' the ropes fer ye, my son, ever sence I knowed which way the wind was blowin'."

"Enough of that!" the youth commanded. "You must not talk that way. I don't know what you've learned; but I loved Margaret Crofton too dearly to have you speak of her in that manner."

A fierce scowl came to the Romany's countenance.

"Have a care, Nick!" he growled. "You're a-flyin' high an' wearin' fine feathers, an' your name's Mr. Nicholas Bouton; but I know, jist the same, that you're on'y Nick Button, the Gypsy."

"The family name is Bouton, isn't it? I've a right to wear my true name. Bouton is nothing but a low corruption of it. And I'm a Gypsy; though I don't care to herald the fact to the world, for reasons which must be obvious."

The pained expression had no visible effect on Greg.

"It's best you shouldn't forget them things, Nick," growling out the words like an angered bull-dog. "I'm yer father, an' I've give you a good ejication which has helped to set ye up in the world, an' I don't like to see you seem to go back on yer own."

"What I was sayin' awhile ago ought reely to be good news to ye, an' yit you fly off the handle at the first word."

"What do you know about her?" trying to speak composedly.

"Well!" and the Romany settled back lazily. "A good 'eal! More'n I kin tell at one settin'. She's the han'some daughter of Sydney Crofton, the way-up merchant; an' she's purty as a ripe peach; rich as a Jew; an' your'n if you've got sand enough to ask her."

That angered and pained look was again showing in the young man's countenance.

"That will do. I don't like the way you paint the picture. Where you got your information is none of my business. I hope you haven't been about the Crofton place."

"Trust me for that," the old man chuckled. "Mebbe I have an' mebbe I hain't. Whatever I've done, er not done, has been in your int'rest, you can depend on it. As I said, I'm a-watchin' the girl fer ye, and puttin' in licks where they'll do the most good."

"You'll oblige me by not troubling yourself about the matter at all!" in a tone that was half entreaty and half command. "And, as the subject is not one I desire to discuss, we'll change it. How much money do you want?"

"A twenty 'll do," the Romany replied, whiningly. "I need more, but a twenty 'll do."

With a sigh Nicholas arose, and going to a desk took out a twenty-dollar bill and gave it to the old man; then bowed him out of the room, and dropped into the chair with brows knit and an expression of deep humiliation and pain on his fine dark face.

CHAPTER III. A PRECIOUS PAIR.

"HELLO! That you, Greg?"

Pepper Smith, on his way from the Gypsy camp, had come almost face to face with Gregory Button, who was at the same time returning from his visit to Nicholas.

"Egad! I'm glad I run acrost ye. That little red-cloaked fortune-teller back there is the worst pill I've struck, yit. I hope he ain't a good one. If he is, I'm knocked out. Didn't do a blame thing but rip up my record an' cover me with warnin's."

Greg rubbed his hands and laughed lightly, and led the way to the shadows of an adjacent building.

"Well, that's bad! But I 'low he must 'a' been guyn' ye."

Greg knew there was nothing in the pretended Gypsy art of fortune-telling, but Gran Button had extracted too many dollars and half-dollars from the superstitious, credulous Pepper for him to confess as much.

"What did he say?"

Pepper ran over the various items constituting his grievance, while the Romany listened with the gravest mien. When Pepper mentioned the charge of murder, Greg started.

"You'll have to go to Gran next time. She never does ye up that way; an' they ain't many can beat her tellin' true fortunes. I've had my doubts about this Baldor for some time. Hanged if I think he's a real Romany; an' if he ain't he can't tell fortunes wu'th shucks. He made a guess at that whole business, jist to see how you'd act. I reckon you didn't give yourself away?"

"I tole him he was a liar!" and Pepper doubled a fist and shook it menacingly at the thought that he had, peraps, been quizzed by the dwarf. "If I was shore he made up that whole thing out of his head I'd go back, yit, and thrash the ground with him."

"Better let it slide!" Greg advised. "I'm 'most shore from certain things that's lately happened, that he's a fraud o' the first water; an' if I find out it's really so I'll ship him mighty quick."

"Quit thinkin' 'bout what he tole ye, er it'll turn yer blood to water. Go back to-morrow an' git Gran to tell you a true fortune."

He seemed anxious to turn Pepper's thoughts from the ominous words of the dwarf, and poured out his advice and conjectures in a flood.

"I've been up to see Nick," he said, suddenly switching from the subject. "There's a young feller that's jist coinin' money; an' it's all because I give him a show in life. I'm proud of Nick."

"An' I s'pose he returns the compliment!" and Pepper lifted his stooped shoulders as he sped the shaft.

"O' course! o' course!" forcing out the clicking sound he made when pleased or tickled.

"He's proud of his dad, Nick is."

"He'd ort to be!" Pepper asserted, dryly.

"Yes, Nick's a-swimmin' right along. An' he's keepin' his eye out fer the main chance. His bizness is payin' big, but he ain't tyin' everything to that. One of these hyer fine days he's a-goin' to rake in a fortune at one grab."

"How's that?" and the old cracksman sniffed the air like a hound at scents game.

"No, 'twon't be by burgl'in', Pep. He's a-goin' to marry it!"

The statement was a disappointment, and the brutal brows that had been raised eagerly again drooped.

"I've been thinkin' mebbe it'd give us a chance to open up a little bizness in your line," ventured the Romany, furtively watching Pepper's expression. "You know the place; an' if you don't know the girl, you know the girl's dad. It's ole Sydney Crofton, the millionaire."

"Ah!" and Pepper once more lifted his shoulders, while his heavy eyes glittered.

"I've been thinkin' over the scheme ever sence I struck the town an' found out the game Nick is playin'. Natcherly I'm anxious fer him to marry the girl, fer it'll mean big money fer me an' Gran. An' I'm goin' to lay my ropes to help him all I can; an' at the same time help us, you understand. Now, if I can get into that house as servant, or in some sich way!"

"The very thing!" Pepper declared, with extreme eagerness. "Then leave one o' the doors unlocked some dark night!"

"That's the lay-out," affirmed the Romany, "though you're a-goin' a little too fast. First thing, I've got to help Nick; fer the fortune fer all of us lays there. Put in a word, now an' then, after he's been there, sayin' what a fine young man he is; and how the bizness men o' the city air all perdictin' what a shinin' bizness light he's goin' to be. An', then, if I can jist git the girl to let Gran tell her fortune, the thing's done. See?"

Pepper asserted that nothing could be clearer or easier of accomplishment.

"An' then, when the thing's all arranged, with the weddin' over, you can make your strike. It'll be kinder like strikin' at Nick, then, but he'll have more money than he'll know what to do with, an' we might as well gobble some of it that way as not."

"K'rect!" averred the cracksman. "If we don't somebody else will."

"Yes, that's what I thought."

"But, hang it!" and Pepper's shoulders drooped again, "that's the very thing red cloak warned me ag'in'!"

"No! Ye must be mistaken, Pep!"

"Not a bit!" wagging his shaggy head.

"Wisht I was."

"Why, he didn't mention Crofton er Nick, did he?"

"No. But he tole me bad luck would foller, if I went on with the bizness I was thinkin' of. An' what was I thinkin' of that blessed minute but workin' up some kind of a scheme like the one you've been talkin' of!"

Greg sighed his relief.

"Oh! Is that all?"

"Enough, hain't it?"

"Under certain circumstances it might be. Frinstance, if Gran had been the one that tole ye yer fortune. But I've jist about figgered out that Billy's a fraud."

Throughout the interview, even when most interested in the unfolding of the Romany's dark plans, Pepper Smith had not once had the warnings of the Pygmy entirely out of his mind, so firm a hold had they taken of his superstitious nature.

"Ye see, he must be a fraud," Greg continued anxious to banish Pepper's alarm. "He hain't been with us on'y about two weeks. He jined us at Centropolis, an' come on with us hyer. He's puzzled me from the first, too; fer, though he don't much look like a Romany, he can sling *Romany lal* like it was his mother tongue. And he's took with most people as a fortune-teller, an' has fetched in a good deal of silver."

"So I kep' him, an' would really like to continer to keep him, fer he's divvied with me right along."

"Well, all I can say is, I don't want no more to do with him!" Pepper growled.

"No more you sha'n't. He's been jist a-guyin' you, take my word for it. I wouldn't give another thought to what he said. And fer my part, I'm goin' to watch the young chap, and if I find he's playin' double, I'll wring his neck."

There was an intensity in the tones which left no doubt that Greg would do as he said.

The precious pair separated, each to continue on his way, but they were scarcely out of sight before a peaked cap arose cautiously from behind a loose pile of boards lying not far distant, and Billy Baldor put in an appearance.

"Struck game I wasn't gunning for!" he muttered, bending his ear forward in a listening attitude. "A good thing I took a notion to follow Pepper. And so I've got to watch Greg, along with the other one! And he'll wring my neck,

if he catches me, will he? Then I'll have to be very careful that he don't catch me!"

He left the shadow of the building, and glided away in the direction taken by the cracksman.

CHAPTER IV.

PLUCK AND LUCK.

"THIS will never do," thought Baldor, as he entered the street and caught sight of the shadow cast by his tall cap. "I'll be too easily recognized."

Darting back into the alley, he removed the cap and thrust it into a crevice between some boards. Then he drew an ordinary cap from one of his pockets, placed it on his head, and proceeded to still further alter his appearance by turning his scarlet cloak so that the black lining was outermost.

This consumed scarcely a minute, but when the street was regained he could see the cracksman nowhere. However, he hastened on in the direction he had seen Pepper take, and in a little while again came in sight of him.

It was a long chase the burglar led him, but the man finally stopped in front of a building in one of the vilest portions of the city. The house was a low frame, with the gaping mouth of a dark cellar showing beneath it. Over the door of the house these words were painted, in dingy characters:

JIM KENNEDY, DOG FANCIER.

After listening intently for a few moments, Pepper rapped lightly on the panels of a door, which had escaped Baldor's attention. This door was swung open, revealing a narrow corridor, into which the cracksman glided. Then all was again silence and darkness.

"I've got to see behind those walls," the boy declared, without, however, having any idea of how the feat was to be accomplished.

Advancing to the door through which Pepper had vanished, he was proceeding to apply an ear to it, when the light fall of footsteps reached him. He drew hastily back into the concealment from which he had emerged, and just in time to escape detection. Two men came around the corner, and approaching the door, rapped, as Pepper had done, and were admitted in the same way.

These mysterious movements naturally whetted Billy's curiosity, and increased his determination to enter.

Fearing to again approach the door, he crept down the short flight leading to the cellar. At its end he found another door. It was locked, as he discovered on trying the fastenings. Whether he could ascertain anything concerning Pepper Smith and the others he had seen vanish into the house, by gaining access to the cellar, was a conundrum. Nevertheless, he quickly fitted a key to the lock, and pushed the door inward.

The most intense darkness reigned, and for a time he stood quite still, listening with all his might, and endeavoring to accustom himself to the gloom. He had matches in abundance, but feared to strike one, not knowing but it might reveal his presence to the men he was seeking.

When the darkness grew less intense he moved forward, feeling every step of the way, and exercising the greatest caution. By following the wall around he felt sure he could not become lost; and when he passed to the opposite end of the room, a gust of heated air drove away some of the stifling odors that had enveloped him, and he came suddenly upon a door.

Beyond this he heard the subdued sound of voices, and slipping into the passage that led from the door, he crept toward them. The distance to be passed over was not great; and he soon found himself against the wall of another underground apartment.

The men—there were six or eight of them—were evidently in a jovial mood, and their rough laughter, interlarded with oaths, rung out at frequent intervals.

Billy had not listened a minute until he heard the voice of Smith.

"Hanged if I want to undertake it jist now!" he declared, referring to some matter which had already been under discussion. "Put it off a week or two, an' I'm with ye."

"An' if we do, the swag will be out of the country. I'm in for strikin' while the iron's hot. In o'her words, rake in the pot while ye kin."

This was enough to show Billy that they were discussing some proposed burglary.

"I'm on the right track," he whispered, pressing closer against the wall. "I felt sure the arrow I let fly at Pepper, this evening, struck in the joints of his armor. He more'n half believes I can tell fortunes, in spite of Greg's state-

ments, for I know I hit most awfully close in regard to the past. And so he's afraid to venture on any new scheme of villainy just at present?"

The continuation of the talk served to confirm Baldor in his conclusion; and, when, at a late hour, the men arose to separate, he felt that the night's work had not been fruitless, for he had gained information that seemed of much value.

He heard the men file slowly from the room and ascend to the apartments above, and was thinking of making his own retreat, when he was arrested by movements in the room he had supposed vacated. Two of the party had evidently remained; and they were now approaching his place of hiding.

Darting back into the cellar, Billy was about to attempt to make his way out by the front entrance, when he was startled by the discovery that several of the gang had halted on the pavement and were engaged in low conversation.

Plainly he could not, now, make his escape that way, and he knew nothing of any other exit. The two were likewise close at hand, and he could make a search.

Trembling with apprehension, he crept near the door through which he had just passed, and crouched against the wall. As he did so his hands came in contact with something cold, an examination showing it to be a piece of heavy chain.

This, in connection with the dingy sign he had seen over the door, gave him a brilliant idea. The men were talking as they advanced, and from their words he knew that they were coming into the cellar to look for some article.

He had stopped near that entrance hoping to be able to slip into the corridor. But the chances seemed largely against the success of the plan, for he reasoned that they would probably strike a match as soon as the cellar was gained.

As the villainous pair drew near, the boy shook the heavy chain and gave a deep low growl, in imitation of a dog.

"Cuss the brute!" one of them exclaimed, as they stopped short. "Kennedy's got them blame bull-dogs scattered all over the house. I hate a dog, anyhow!"

At this evidence of the success of the trick, Billy again shook the chain and repeated the dog-like warning; and this time, to his astonishment, he was answered in the same manner from the opposite side of the cellar. He had aroused a real bull-dog!

At this the men drew quickly back into the corridor, and soon he heard them moving off in another direction, swearing volubly at Kennedy and his dogs.

"Now, I am in a fix!" thought Billy, as the hoarse growl came again, and two fiery spots showed that the dog was moving toward him.

For an instant, overcome by surprise and fear, he grasped the chain as if meditating a defense. Then he dropped it, and sinking into a squatting attitude, patted his knee and whistled softly and coaxingly.

The dwarf was a born animal trainer. He had a fondness for the entire brute creation, and on many occasions his marvelous power over the most savage beasts had been manifested.

The ferocious bulldog, one of the fiercest of the many kept by Kennedy, recognized instantly the voice of a master, and crept whiningly to Billy's feet, where it cowered and cringed for an instant, and ended by trying to lick the boy's hands and face.

"Good dog!" and he patted it boldly on the head. "You must have been sleeping like a top when I first crawled in here, not to have heard me, then. I was pretty still, was I? Well, goodness knows, I tried to be. I wonder what your master would think, should he see you now? I'm much afraid he'd be tempted to shoot you. Eh? Don't you think so?"

For reply the dog wagged his stumpy tail and tried to place his heavy paws on Billy's breast.

"Down, sir! Down! You'll spoil my Sunday garments. And that wouldn't do, you know. What does your master keep you for? Fighting?" passing his hands over the brute's head and sides. "Yes, I thought he did. And you've been chewing up other dogs for the pleasure of the human brutes he keeps about him? That's too bad! And some of the other dogs have been chewing you, too, to judge by those knots. Well, you ought to reform. What's your name? Bull? Carlo? Towser?"

In this low, soothing way Billy talked to the dog until he heard the men leave the pavement in front of the place. Then, with the bulldog at his heels, he advanced to the door, listened awhile, and applied the key. When the door swung open, the animal evinced a disposition to follow him into the street. But he pushed it

gently back, drew the door to and locked it, and hurried off in the direction of the Gypsy camp.

CHAPTER V.

THE FACE AT THE TRANSOM.

THE city of St. Cloud (a fanciful name will do as well as the real) had within its limits few young business men of more promise than Nicholas Bouton. Strange as it may seem, Gregory Bouton,—or Button, as he was generally called—had given Nicholas the benefit of a fair education; and the latter, being of a studious and ambitious bent, had turned every opportunity to good account.

Why Greg Button had in this matter pursued a course so diametrically opposed to every tradition of the Romany race had called forth endless comment. He never explained; but those thoroughly acquainted with the man felt sure there was ample motive. He never did anything which would not serve his own ends. And when Nicholas entered on his business career, and began to show such unmistakable signs of prosperity, there were many, principally of his own people, who saw in this the fruition of Greg's plans; firmly believing that the crafty old Romany had trained his son for a career which would enable the father to live ever after on the proceeds of that son's sagacity and toil.

But the true reason, the motive that had inspired Greg all those years, was as unguessed then as it had ever been.

Nicholas had now been eight years engaged in business in St. Cloud. He had started in a very humble way indeed, his capital being limited to the savings of three years of hard toil as a commercial traveler in the line he intended to follow. But the little with which he began increased rapidly. His business sense was acute. He kept the best of everything in which he dealt. His store room was always a marvel of neatness; his clerks accommodating; his show-windows models of artistic display. So that in a short time much of the best custom of the place flocked to him; and a customer once gained he was careful not to lose.

And now, at the end of eight years, he was climbing toward the top round of the ladder, with the prospect of brilliant financial achievements just ahead.

He seldom saw the Romany band with which he had so long lived. Time and again he had endeavored to induce the Boutons to abandon their wandering life and settle down in a quiet way, agreeing to see that they should never want for anything. But they had as persistently refused. The roving instinct was too strong upon them.

It would be too much to say that he held the most loving of feelings for his father's family. Gran Bouton was not his mother, he had long known, and he could not prevent a secret pleasure at the assurance. His own mother had died years before. And Nell was not related to him in any way. Greg only, of the entire Romany race, was united to him by ties of blood; and for him he manfully tried to cultivate filial respect and devotion.

For reasons which must be evident he had never announced himself to the world as a Gypsy. He had not denied the fact, and would not have done so if approached on the subject, but there was nothing in it of which he could be proud. The Gypsies are tainted by centuries of vagabondage and petty deceit, not to say thieving, and the world very justly does not regard them with favor. And no one knew this better than Nicholas Bouton.

Lately there had entered into his life new hopes, new pleasures, and new pains. Business relations had brought him into frequent communication with the merchant millionaire, Sydney Crofton. On several occasions Crofton had invited him to his stately residence. There Nicholas had met Margaret Crofton, the merchant's daughter—as fair a flower as ever bloomed near the hot and dusty ways of mercantile life.

The young folks were mutually attracted; and, as a natural consequence, their relations soon became something warmer than those of mere formal cordiality. The merchant must have been aware of this, for he was reputed to be a man of uncommon comprehension and shrewdness. But, he gave no sign; and, to the secret delight of the young people, left them to amuse themselves as much as they liked in wandering about the spacious gardens and inclosures.

Margaret had no mother, and it may be that Crofton was too lax in his restrictions. Very likely he was, according to the modern notions

of the restraint to be placed on the association of young, unmarried couples. However this may be, he was not wrong in trusting implicitly in the manhood and honor of Nicholas Bouton.

Nicholas had never spoken to Margaret on the subject of love. He hoped to do so, some day. Just then, all he asked was the privilege, the dangerous privilege, of basking in the light of her brown eyes, and hearkening to the delicious music of her well-modulated voice.

Yet the pleasure brought with it unceasing pain. He could not hide from himself the fact that he was daily and hourly becoming more and more enamored of her charms. This gentle dalliance could not, in the very nature of things, continue forever. The time would come when he must declare himself, or be set down as a scoundrel who had wantonly trifled with a pure woman's affections. And how could he make a declaration of his love when he knew that in his veins flowed the despised blood of the Gypsies?

Time and again this question had startled him from his mid-day dreams of Margaret's beauty, and sent him reeling and heartsick to moan out his distress in the privacy of his own chamber.

Naturally the sudden intrusion of the Romany band and the stealthy visit of Greg did not tend to restfulness of mind; and when the old Romany had departed, that night, Nicholas found himself thoroughly unfit for the duties that constantly confronted him. His brain seemed in a whirl, and when he re-entered the store-room the lights danced in a bewildered and blinding way. He could not serve customers with any degree of satisfaction, and left soon after intrusting the work of the evening entirely to his clerks.

That night was to him a sleepless one; and ere morning dawned he had resolved to reveal everything to Margaret, and then leave her forever, for he could not conceive that she would care for him after she was made aware of his antecedents.

When evening returned it found him on his way to the Crofton residence, situated in the most fashionable part of the city. As he neared the place his high-born resolve suddenly forsook him. It had been more easy to conceive than to execute. For a moment he hesitated, thinking to return when his courage had revived.

But this was the evening on which she would be expecting him to visit her. Besides, she might have noticed his approach. So, with a beating heart, he pressed the latch of the gate and passed up the graveled walk.

She greeted him with her usual kindness, but he found himself ill at ease. Noticing this she seated herself at the piano and sung some of the songs for which he had expressed a liking. Her voice was as clear and musical as a bird's, and as he watched her white fingers flash over the keys, and noted the loveliness of her features, and the rounded fullness of her throat, he felt he could never say the words he had that day conned so diligently. It would be like signing his own death-warrant!

When the songs had ended she rallied him on his seeming absent-mindedness.

"You're giving too much thought to your business!" she declared.

"It has worried me not a little," he replied, grasping at the excuse thus offered. "I shall have to go into the country for a resting spell, I'm afraid."

"By all means. It would be just the thing. Papa and I are going soon. Have you ever seen the Rockies, Mr. Bouton?"

Nicholas was compelled to confess that he had not.

"The scenery is grand and delightful beyond description," she asserted, waxing enthusiastic. "One doesn't need to go as far as the Yellowstone to find wonders and beauties. We spent a portion of last summer in Colorado, visiting Pike's Peak, the Garden of the Gods, Manitou, the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas, besides making trips to a number of the mining towns. It was a journey to be remembered through life."

In this pleasant way she led him from the somber thoughts that had troubled him; and, to his own surprise, he was soon talking and laughing with her in the old, easy, familiar manner.

An hour slipped by almost unnoted.

Margaret was speaking of a new book she had been reading, when she suddenly stopped, with a gasping scream.

Nicholas sprang to her assistance, at the same time glancing in the direction she had pointed.

The face of a man was pressed against the transom. He caught only a fleeting glimpse and then it was gone. But the view, slight as it was, revealed the lowering visage of Greg Button!

The mental shock was so great that he became momentarily giddy. But weakness at such a time must seem cowardice; and conscious of this he rung the bell for a servant, and sprang into the corridor. What he should do if he encountered Greg, he feared to question. He hoped the latter would carry himself away as nimbly as possible. Nevertheless, when a number of servants had gathered about him, he sent the women to their young mistress and ordered the others to search the place.

All he did was, however, purely mechanical. He was numbed by the feelings that crowded on like tidal waves.

The search, though prosecuted vigorously, was unsuccessful, as he had been praying for it to be.

Then knowing he could not meet Margaret again with any equanimity, he sent up an inquiry and regards; and having received the reply that she was quite restored from the effects of the shock, he slipped out of the house and crept like a guilty thing, away.

CHAPTER VI.

IN A SAVAGE MOOD.

JIM KENNEDY, sitting on the shabby steps of the house and whipping at his boots with a heavy dog-whip, was in a very savage mood. It was the evening following the meeting of ruffians in the underground apartment. Kennedy had just made the discovery that some one had been in the cellar that night, and the big bull-dog had not chewed up the intruder as its master confidently hoped and expected it would in such an event.

"I can't understand it at all!" he growled. "Heenan never done that way with anybody afore. An' it must have been a boy, too, jedge-in' by the tracks. Hanged if I hain't a notion to shoot him! A dog that'll act that way hain't no yearthly use."

In Kennedy's estimation, all a dog was created for was to chew up one of its kind, or some human being; and he had emphasized this belief by cruelly flogging the offending "Heenan" with a dog-whip he held in his hands.

"Now, I wonder if it could 'a' been one of them blamed police spies? They're allus a-snoopin' round. I't was, likey he heered somethin' we don't want to be known. I'm a notion to go back an' give Heenan another'n fer that; bu'st me, if I hain't! The very idee! An' the savagest dog I've got on the place! It's perfec'ly reedulous."

Kennedy gave the extended boot a fearful cut; a sample, probably, of what he desired to inflict on the dog.

"An' I put him in that cellar a purpose to keep any one frum spyin', never dreamin' but he'd do his duty! It actilly makes me sick to think about it."

For more than an hour the brutal and burly dog fancier sat, thus, mumbling out his moody thoughts and exercising the whip on his heavy cow-hides. Then a man made his appearance from some undiscoverable quarter; and the two entered the building.

After a time Kennedy returned alone and resumed his position on the steps, greeting some new arrivals as he did so. One of these was a dark-skinned, black-eyed young man; and on him the dog fancier bestowed a chuckle and a wink.

A number of others passed into the building at intervals varying from five minutes to a half-hour, and Kennedy at last rose and followed them.

He went directly to the underground room where the conference had been held on the previous night; and here he found the arrivals assembled around a table, some of them playing cards and others engaged in conversation.

By the light of the dimly burning coal-oil lamp, the young man on whom he had bestowed the chuckle and wink was now seen to be the Gypsy girl, Nell, arrayed in man's attire.

"What's the reason Greg ha'n't come?" he questioned of her. "I've been a-expectin' him fer nigh on an hour."

"Don't know," she answered, carelessly, removing the hat that half concealed her face and tossing back her black locks. "Haven't seen him sence mornin'. He went up to town then, and ha'n't never come back as I knows."

The Romany made his appearance soon after, however, seeming in little better mood than Kennedy had been when introduced to the notice of the reader.

"Cuss 'em all!" he growled, when questioned concerning the cause of his delay. "Ha'n't had wuss luck sence the day I was borned. Fu'st place, I tried to git a job of ole Crofton, as I tole Pepper I was goin' to las' night. He's a crusty ole duffer, if they ever was one. Never was a feller as perlite as me, when I called on the ole chap, an' tole him I was half starvin' an' willin' to work at anything fer 'most nothin', if he'd on'y give me a job. An' what does he do put p'int to the door an' tell me to git; that he weren't in the habit o' birin' tramps; and if I didn't lift my hoofs lively he'd set the dog onto me!"

"The precious ole willain!" exclaimed Pepper, lifting his shoulders and scowling from beneath his shaggy brows.

"What kind of a dog was it?" queried Kennedy, his professional curiosity aroused.

"An' when I went to the house to-night, and tried to take a quiet look around, jest in the line of our bizness, ye know, his girl clapped her peepers onto me, an' I had to hustle lively to git out o' the house," the Romany continued, unheeding the dog fancier's question. "If it hadn't been for certain reasons, such as burnin' up the swag, I'd 'a' been tempted to set fire to the shanty."

"It's a shame!" Pepper asserted. "A willainous shame!"

And the angered Romany, feeling that Pepper had not done the subject half justice, filled the air with epithets.

"If it was a bulldog," said Kennedy, again breaking silence, "I'd like to steal him to take the place of Heenan. That dog ain't wuth shucks! There was a feller in the cellar, las' night, an' the dog never teched him! It don't seem like it c'u'd be, but it's a fac'."

The statement caused considerable surprise and consternation, to those who were aware of the fact that the dog was kept there; and the two who had thought to visit the cellar while Billy Balder was therein concealed came forward with accounts of their experience.

"Two dogs!" howled Kennedy. "They wasn't never but one."

"We heered two dogs growl!" the rascals averred. "An' you bet we got out o' there, double quick."

For an instant Kennedy sat in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Then they was a boy an' a dog! I seen the boy's tracks in the dust on the floor, and s'posed the dog's tracks was mixed up with those of Heenan's. That jist lays me out, gents, flatter'n a flounder!"

"An' that boy an' that dog never come there fer nothin'! He was one o' these police spies, I'm willin' to take my 'davy. An' Heenan never teched 'em. Well! Well! Next thing we hear'll be that one o' these rich coves has give all their money to sich as us. Cussed if I hain't a notion to shoot Heenan, yit, fer that!"

These disclosures brought about an adjournment to the cellar, where Heenan was found as vigilant and ferocious as his master could wish, much to the latter's disgust.

"Yes, you can r'ar an' cavort, now, when on'y friends is hyer an' they hain't no need fer ye doin' so, but what about las' night?" and Kennedy emphasized the question by a kick that sent the brute whining into his corner.

"We'll have to put more dogs in there, er else a watch!" Pepper ventured, when they had returned to the room. "No tellin' what the kid may have heered. An' if he was a spy!"

He groaned expressively as his stooped shoulders went up.

"If he was we may git into trouble!" Kennedy declared. "I'll take pains, you may be shore, that anything like that don't happen again."

Having discussed this subject in all its bearings and duly expressed their determinations and fears, they recurred to the proposed robbery of the Crofton residence.

"I'm glad Nell's hyer to-night," and Greg glanced keenly at the girl. "I'm to the end o' my rope, but I 'low Nell can fetch us out smilin'."

"How's that?" Kennedy questioned.

"Have her do jest what I failed to do: Git into the house as a servant, where she can lay plans to open the doors fer us, some dark night."

The girl looked up quickly, and though she did not immediately reply, her glance showed she comprehended the secret motive at the bottom of Greg's proposition.

Greg had had a talk with her only the day previous concerning his schemes to assist Nicholas in winning the hand of the fair Margaret, and she knew he would want her to carry on the work in his stead.

A peculiar light, which, if the Romany had seen it, would have much puzzled the old rascal, came into her eyes, as she turned away her gaze.

"You'll do it, Nell?" he said, coaxingly.
 "Yes, I s'pose so, if I'm give a big enough share of the swag."

"We'll do the square thing by ye!" Pepper hastened to assure her. "There's lots of stuff in that shebang, an' we can afford to be lib'ral."

"Yes," the others chimed in, "we'll divvy fair."

"I'll go, then, and to-morrow," Nell assented, that singular light again flashing momentarily in her eyes. "The sooner the better!"

CHAPTER VII. A SCARED VILLAIN.

BILLY BALDOR was not a youth to allow the grass to grow under his feet, while working at any task. "Strike while the iron is hot," was a motto strongly impressed on him by his friend and whilom patron, Signal Sam, the Colorado silver king; and a motto he had ever since endeavored to live up to.

He had joined the Gypsies for a definite purpose. Two years previous, an atrocious murder had been committed in an adjoining city. Rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the murderer; and though the police and detective force had used every energy, no trace of the guilty man had yet been discovered. With the lapse of time the search had grown cold and the affair half forgotten.

But a certain circumstance—said circumstance being no less than the fact that the murdered man had once befriended the dwarf—determined him to take up the fallen threads and endeavor to accomplish what the officers had failed in.

It seemed a hopeless task for one so situated; but Billy Baldor was a man in all save stature, and had more than the average man's brains. And he began his work with such systematic energy that he was not long in coming on evidences that greatly assisted in buoying his ardent spirits.

Indications pointed strongly to the fact that the murderer was on intimate terms with a certain band of Gypsies, if not a member of their organization; and this had induced him to join the band. He at first suspected Greg very strongly, but since coming to St. Cloud began to think Pepper Smith the man he was looking for. And events since then had tended to confirm this theory. Nevertheless, he had no proof positive against Pepper, though he felt sure the cracksman was the guilty party.

The night following the last meeting of the burglars in the underground apartments of the dog fancier, found Billy on the streets of St. Cloud, disguised as a newsboy, and with a bundle of evening papers under one arm.

He had followed Pepper that evening, and seen him enter a certain building, and was now awaiting the fellow's reappearance.

"He's pretty sure to come this way," he muttered, as he stood carelessly at the street corner, seeming to see only the prospective purchasers presented in the hurrying throngs.

After a moment's loitering he slipped back into the shadows cast by the building. Here he drew from a pocket a sheet of paper, and hastily scanned it.

The light was not the best, but the letters were large and easily decipherable. This is what the sheet contained:

"\$5,000 REWARD.

"The above reward will be paid for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the party or parties who, on the night of the 9th of November, 1887, murdered and robbed John Fenton, of Trenton Springs.

CECIL KING,

"Trenton Springs Marshal."

After thus glancing at the poster, Billy advanced and tacked it to the awning-post, where it could not fail to be seen by any one coming out of the house.

Then he retreated to the shadows and carefully watched and waited.

Fifteen minutes after, Pepper Smith descended the steps in company with a man of business-like appearance.

"Hello! What's this?" and the man stopped and pointed to the paper. "Been somebody committing murder, eh?"

Pepper, as soon as his gaze fell on the poster, turned deathly pale and grasped the awning-post for support.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"Five thousand for the arrest of the murderer of John Fenton, of Trenton Springs. Murder committed two years ago."

"It's a good while," said Pepper, drawing himself up painfully and turning away. "Not much chance of gittin' the feller now, eh?"

"Very little!" and the tone showed the man had only a passing interest in the matter.

Then they passed beyond hearing.

"He's my man!" Baldor whispered, hurrying to the post and tearing away the sheet. "There can't be a doubt of it. Now, to tangle him up some way and get enough proof to convict him!"

CHAPTER VIII. A VERBAL GAUNTLET.

"HEY! What's the meanin' of this?" The dwarf was aroused the next morning by these words, spoken in the harsh voice of the Romany.

Greg was standing by the little cot in the tent occupied by Baldor, and glaring at the latter as if he contemplated an assault. In one hand he held Billy's scarlet cloak and in the other the poster, having evidently just taken it from one of his pockets.

"What do you mean?" the boy queried, rubbing his eyes sleepily and assuming a calmness of demeanor he did not feel.

"Why, this!" and Greg shook the paper at him. "Where did you get it, and what are you doin' with it? Tell me, or I'll shake the everlasting daylight out o' ye!"

"Perhaps you'd better tell me first what you're doing with my clothing! You're not my guardian, Mr. Button, and I've never authorized you to go through my pockets in that style. There's a dollar in there, too! Maybe you've hooked onto that?"

"Hear him!" yelled the Romany, fairly dancing up and down in his rage.

Billy realized that in transferring the poster to the pockets of his cloak and bringing it home with him he had committed a great blunder, but he had not dreamed that the Romany might venture on such a search. It was plain, now, that in some way Greg had had his suspicions aroused against the little fortune-teller.

"Yes, hear him!" replied Baldor, fighting for time and racking his brain for a plausible way to account for the presence of the poster. "What's so very strange about that?"

"Why, jist this, Billy: It goes for to show that you're in with the cussed police in some way, an' me an' them gentlemen never did pull well together. I hain't a-carin' specially fer this thing, more'n fer any other like it; but I want ye to understand that you can't monkey with officers an' stay in this hyer camp. Romanies and officers never did agree an' never will, an' no more will them that's a-spyin' fer the officers. You hear me!"

"Is that all?" and the boy simulated great surprise. "I thought I'd really done something terrible. That maybe you'd got the fool idea into your head that it was me that the reward was offered for."

He curled up in the bed and chuckled gleefully. "What are you drivin' at?" and the Romany frowned.

"Why, simply this, Mr. Button: I saw that posted against a wall down-town last night, and pulled it off to read it. Then, without noticing what I did I must have stuck it into my pocket. Is there anything so strange about that?"

"Ye'r a-lyin'," declared the Gypsy, eying him closely.

"Very well, then, that settles it. You're a good deal bigger than me, and the boss of this camp, and if you want to call me names I suppose you can. I ought to knock you down for doing it; but as I can't I'll have to take it and as much more as you want to send."

"See hyer, Billy!" and the Romany's voice took on a coaxing tone. "You ha'n't a-givin' me the straight goods now, be you?"

"Why, look at the poster yourself! Don't it show that I'm giving it to you straight, as you call it? You can see where the tacks were that held it in place. That shows I tore it down, as I said. There's no use in arguin' the matter. You'll believe it or not, just as you please, anyway!"

"An' you ha'n't been a-chinnin' with any officers sence you struck this town?"

"I have not!" and the boy made this reply forcibly and with a clear conscience. "I haven't seen an officer, that I'm aware of, except the city policemen."

Greg shook his head, as if not sure he had heard the truth.

"Well, I'll take keer o' this. An' if you don't want to be h'isted out o' hyer mighty sudden, or worse, don't bring any more of 'em around. An' keep clear of the officers. Romanies and them don't agree!"

With this final shot Greg thrust the poster into one of his pockets and took his departure.

"A narrow shave, that!" and Billy followed the Gypsy with his eyes until the fellow disappeared in an alley. "I wonder now just how much he guesses? I tell you I'll have to go slow and be mighty careful from this on. If it wasn't

daylight I'd follow him and see where he goes and what he does."

If Billy could have followed the Romany that morning he would have seen him go to an obscure part of the town, slip through an alley and enter a flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs he tapped on a door; and a heavy voice bade him enter.

The owner of the voice was none other than Pepper Smith, who tumbled out of bed as the Gypsy entered.

"Jist got into a good snooze," and Pepper rubbed his eyes. "Was up about all night. What fetches ye out so thunderin' early?"

"This," said the Romany, spreading out the poster so that the cracksman could see it.

The sleepy eyes opened to their fullest extent, and the ashy hue once more crept into the cracksman's face.

"Where do you s'pose I got it?" giving a characteristic click with his tongue. "Found it in the pocket of that red-cloaked fortune-teller!"

"The deuce!" and Pepper sunk back in a half faint. "What do you s'pose it means? That's the second one o' them I've seen sence yisterday. One on an awnin'-post up town, an' this one. What d'ye reckon it means, Greg? Haven't seen one afore fer over a year."

"So, this hain't the only one? I thought meb-be 'twas. Then, the officers must 'a' took up that bizness ag'in. I low we'll have to keep snady fer awhile. Wonder what could 'a' started 'em out ag'in?"

"I say, Greg!" without answering the question. "Do you reckon that blame, little red-coat can be onto this thing in any way?"

"That's what I thought at first. I've been a-tryin' to watch him ever sence we had our talk. Ever' night I go through his clothes, and this is what I found this mornin'. I tackled him 'bout where he got it, an' he tole a very purty yarn 'bout pullin' it off a wall to read it, etc. Seemed to be slingin' it straight, but I couldn't tell. Might 'a' been all a lie, ye know."

Pepper was trying to work into his coat—that was all he had removed on lying down—but shook so it appeared likely he would be forced to ask assistance.

"It's hangin' fer both of us, Greg, if we're gobbled. If I was shore the boy guessed anything I'd say chuck him into the river some dark night. But, hang it! I'm afear'd to tackle a chap like him. If he can tell fortunes, why can't he know what we're thinkin' of?"

"You're a fool, Pepper!" was the uncomplimentary reply. "He can't tell his own fortune, no matter how good he is at the bizness. And that'd be tellin' his own fortune, wouldn't it? Specially if we thought o' doin' anything like you say? But I'm about come to the conclusion that he's a fu'st-class fraud, as far as fortunes goes; though he do fetch us in lots of money."

The statement that fortune-tellers had not power to foretell events affecting themselves had a remarkably bracing effect on the cracksman's nerves. It removed a shadow that had long hovered over him.

"Then, we'll lay him out, if he shows any signs o' bein' in with the police!" was his cold-blooded comment. "Our necks air already in the halter, an' I reckon we can't stick 'em in much further. You watch him, and I'll watch him; an' atween us we'll trip the young gent up, if he's comin' anything scaly!"

"You bet!" Greg assented, thrusting the offending poster into the stove. "We'll do 'im up in short meter. I'll put Nell an' Gran to watchin' him, too, an' we'll git him!"

CHAPTER IX.

WITH THE CHIEF OF POLICE.

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that he felt it would be unsafe to attempt to follow the Romany, that morning, the latter was scarcely out of sight when Billy Baldor began to fidget uneasily and show symptoms of mental nervousness. The recent action of the Romany, taken in connection with the conversation between the latter and Pepper Smith, revealed the undoubted and disagreeable fact that he was suspected and watched.

"I told him I hadn't spoken to the police, but I didn't promise not to!" he soliloquized.

Then he called to Nell, in the adjoining tent, and informed her he was going down-town for a short time.

"I'll be back before the day's work is likely to commence!" he announced. "But if any one in search of ready-made fortunes should ask for me you can tell them Gran will do as well."

If that don't satisfy them they can come again, or wait."

With this he sallied forth. A heavy fog was lifting itself, the rising sun glancing at intervals through its sinuous folds. Already the noises of the city began to penetrate to that obscure quarter.

When he had gained the alley he looked back to see if any one was observing the route he had taken. There were no signs of life in the Gypsy encampment. On gaining the street end of the alley he deviated from the direct course, and approached a deserted building. This he entered, clambering in over the broken, back door.

There was a pile of lumber and refuse within, and from beneath this he drew the clothing he had worn while masquerading as a newsboy. It took little time to effect the desired change; and when he crept away there was, with the exception of his small stature, scarcely anything in his appearance to suggest the fortune-telling Pymy.

"Now, if I haven't been seen, I'm all right. I'll hail the first cab I come to. My Romany friends would never think of looking for me in such a vehicle."

Thus cogitating, he hastened on, keeping to the back streets till well up into the city; then he crossed to a thoroughfare where cabs were always in waiting.

"Drive me to the office of the chief of police!" he said, approaching the nearest.

The driver stared, but observing the look of earnestness in the boy's face, swung the cab door open.

"All right. Climb in," and a second later, Billy was being whirled through the streets. He did not know where the office of the chief of police might be; but within fifteen minutes the cab drew up in front of a large stone building, and the Jehu dismounted.

"Hyer you air," he said. "Room ten, third floor. Take the elevator. Fifty cents!"

"Works cheaper than I do!" thought Billy, dropping the silver piece into the extended hand. "I ought to pay him with a good fortune, instead."

Although somewhat unused to the ways of large cities and large buildings, Billy readily found the room to which he had been directed.

There were several persons in the apartment, the man pointed out as the chief of police being seated in a comfortable office-chair before a wide desk strewn with letters and papers.

"What can I do for you, my man?" he queried, as Billy advanced and requested a few words with him.

"Can—can I see you alone?" the dwarf faltered, glancing apprehensively at the other occupants.

"A matter of privacy, eh? Certainly! Come this way."

He pushed aside a folding door and ushered his visitor into an adjoining room.

"Now what is it?" he asked, leaning against a desk and motioning the little man to a seat. "You need have no fear of being overheard here."

He had a pleasant face and a pleasant voice, and his frank blue eyes were invitations to confidence.

"Perhaps I'm foolish for coming to you so soon," the dwarf began. "But, I didn't know what else to do. I'm not a newsboy, neither am I as young as I seem."

Then in a straightforward manner he told who and what he was, ending with placing in the man's hands a letter of recommendation from "Signal Sam" Holcomb.

"Aha! So you are a sort of *protege* of the gentleman? I used to know him well. I remember when he made that rich strike at Silverton. But, go on with your story. I'm sure there's more of it."

"There is!" Baldor confessed. "A great deal more. I think I have struck the trail of the murderer of John Fenton, of Trenton Springs."

The chief's eyes expanded in astonishment. His interest was aroused now, even if it had not been before.

"Go on," he said, dropping into a chair at Billy's side. "Tell me all you've discovered."

"I may have exaggerated its importance," Billy replied, preliminary to the narration.

"It seems to me, though, I can't be mistaken."

"I think you're on the right track!" and the chief thoughtfully turned over the account he had heard. "Yes, I'm sure of it. Do you think you can go on with the work, as you've begun? You have succeeded in doing what has been beyond the power of the best men on the force, and you ought to be allowed to finish it in your own way, and gain the credit that will

attach. Or, would you prefer assistance? I suppose you came for help!"

"On the contrary, I came for protection. If you please, sir, I should much prefer to go on as I'm doing. But, I know that to do so will place me in the greatest danger. I am already an object of distrust, and from this on, no doubt every movement I make will be closely watched. If you could arrange it so that in case anything happens to me, a force could be sent to my aid?"

"Certainly! Certainly! Nothing is easier. I know well where this Gypsy camp is! We generally keep something of a watch on those scamps, for they're always up to some petty theft or other. I'll send a man into that neighborhood and have him set up in the confection line. He'll be there to-morrow. It will be an easy matter to hold communication with him, and even send reports to this office, without your Gypsy friends being any the wiser, watch they never so closely."

"Of course you're not to know this man. And he will seem not to know you. If all is going well, go in each evening and purchase a dime's worth of something. If affairs begin to look squally and you want some one to shadow you for the sake of giving protection, buy only a nickel's worth. And when you have fastened this matter on the right parties, and want a squad to assist in the arrest, ask the confection man to allow you to tell his fortune, naming an hour when it will be convenient to do so, and the men will be at the store, ready to follow you or to do as you direct, when that hour arrives."

"If you should at any time have special reasons for wishing to communicate with this office, sell the man a newspaper—approaching him in the disguise of a newsboy, of course—and within the folds of that newspaper place that communication."

"Never, under any circumstance, act as if you knew him or have the faintest idea he is other than he seems. Never speak to him except in reference to your purchases and the like. If you are careful in this, no one will ever guess at the truth, and you can thus make daily or semi-daily reports to this office without the slightest danger of discovery."

"And remember, that with less than an hour's notice you can have the protection of our shadows."

Baldor thanked the chief for his kind offers, and assured him he would endeavor to deserve the confidence thus reposed; and after some further talk on the same and kindred subjects, he left the room, and was driven in a cab to a short distance of the alley.

It was yet early; and when he had again changed his garments and reached the Gypsy camp in his scarlet cloak and tall cap, Greg had not returned.

CHAPTER X.

THE FEALTY OF TRUE LOVE.

"You do look jist too lovely, ma'am!" and Nell Button clasped her brown hands in a delighted way, and stepped backward to obtain the best effect to be given by the fading light of the sun.

"It is becoming!" crossing the room to view herself in the long mirror. "Would I not look better if this bow at the throat were a white one?"

"Indeed you wouldn't, Miss Margaret! You need that bit of color. I don't reely think you could look better than you do at this minute."

Nell Button had an artist's eye. Especially did she delight in a "bit of color," as she expressed it. Rather careless of her own attire, when among the Romanies, she yet knew how to array herself, and only lacked the proper incentive to make of herself a well-dressed and charming woman, to outward appearance at least. That she could ever be a lady does not necessarily follow.

The plan proposed by Greg at that last meeting at the dog-fancier's had been successfully carried out, and she was now installed as the servant and attendant of the merchant's daughter. Much shrewd scheming, and the forging of some letters of recommendation from mythical former mistresses had accomplished the work.

Margaret had seen too little of the world to be anything but unsuspecting and ingenuous.

Almost a week had elapsed since she had engaged this new maid, and she had as yet found no fault with her. Apparently truthful and honest, with a seeming desire to render faithful service, there was no ground for criticism.

Nell had given the name of Maggie Stewart as her own, and told a prettily-concocted story of her past life and present circumstances, all of which Margaret had accepted without question.

"No, you couldn't look better if you tried!" Nell again assured, walking slowly around her mistress and noting all the details of her dress. "The young gentleman will sure be pleased with you to-night!"

"What do you know of him, Maggie? I don't think you have seen him; and if you have I haven't given you permission to address me on the subject."

"I don't know nothin' at all," Nell hastily made answer, perceiving her mistake. "Most young ladies do have gentlemen acquaintances which calls on 'em sometimes. I was jist guessin'—an'—thinkin' how handsome you do look!"

Then, feeling somewhat nervous, and fearful lest she should betray her great secret, she excused herself soon after and left the apartment.

"She's a good girl," thought Margaret, as the door closed on the maid, "and no doubt I spoke too harshly to her. She didn't intend an impertinence."

With this she fell to dreaming of the "young gentleman," and passed into that delightful state so blissful to maidens not "fancy free."

Nicholas had not called since the night the face of the supposed burglar had been seen above the transom, but this absence had no connection, in Margaret's mind, with that event. He usually spent two evenings of each week in her presence, though, when business demanded his attention, he would sometimes forego this pleasure.

"But he will come to-night!" she mused. "He always comes on this night."

And so she had arrayed herself in her most becoming garments, and given much anxious thought to the task of making herself lovely in his sight.

As the twilight faded into darkness she heard Nicholas's well-known step on the graveled walk, and her cheeks took on the color of the rose. And even when she advanced to greet him, she was painfully aware that her heart was still beating in a tell-tale way.

His handsome face was this time wreathed in smiles, and he had evidently forgotten the cares that vexed him on the occasion of his previous visit. But, as he passed into the parlor, Nell glided by like a shadowy ghost; and his manner became more distraught than it had ever been.

"Who is that girl?" he asked, sinking tremblingly into a chair.

The question was not put because he did not himself know, but to test the extent of Margaret's knowledge, for it was obvious Nell had gained some sort of footing in the household.

"My new maid, Maggie Stewart! And the most faithful I have had for a long time. You are not ill?"

She had caught the anguished expression on her lover's face.

"No," he said. "But I happen to know that the girl is an impostor. The name she has given you is not her real name."

He stopped and buried his face in his hands, and Margaret fancied she detected a suppressed groan.

"You alarm me!" she exclaimed.

"And I must distress you, I fear!" looking up quickly. "There is no danger that the girl can hear?"

Margaret arose and went to the door and glanced into the passage. When she returned she drew the door to after her, and then took a seat at his side.

"What is it?" she queried, anxiety showing in her voice and in her countenance. "You have something to tell me. Something concerning her?"

"I have," he confessed; and when she looked into his eyes she saw they were blood-shot, and that his face was drawn and haggard, as if from great pain.

"I have much to tell you; but it does not wholly concern her. It concerns myself. You will hate and despise me when you hear it. But, I must tell it. Otherwise I shall feel myself a life-long criminal."

She took one of his hands in hers, as if to assure him of her belief in his goodness and innocence.

"I am not what I seem, Margaret! I am false to the core. Yes, false as the man who betrayed his Lord. You have thought me a reputable business man, and I have feared to tell you of my past, and of my kinship, dreading your scorn."

"I do not understand you!" she panted, clinging to the hand, while her face became as white as marble.

"How could you, when you are the soul of honesty and purity?" he continued, as if determined to abase himself to the dust. "I am not worthy to sit in this room with you. For—oh,

the horror of it! I am nothing but a despised Gypsy. My father is a Gypsy; and the girl who has palmed herself on you is his adopted daughter!"

Margaret's breast rose and fell with the fierceness of the emotions which were rending her; but she said not a word—only clinging to Nicholas's hand as drowning people are said to cling to straws.

"Why do you not tell me to go?" he demanded. "Why not say that you hate me for the deception, and command me never to appear again in your presence?"

"Oh, my dear! I have basely deceived you! But, believe me, it was because I love you. I love you, love you, and shall continue to love you, though you tell me never to look on your sweet face again."

"And I do not tell you to go, dear Nicholas, because I return your love!" the big tears standing in her eyes. "You accuse yourself too harshly. You have told me all?"

"All! all!" he cried, drawing her to his breast. "Is not that enough to forever condemn me? That girl calls herself Nell Button, when she is sailing under her true colors, and my father calls himself Gregory Button. But in that—in the matter of a name, I have been truthful. The family name is Bouton."

"But, whatever I have been or done, Margaret, I have never been criminal. Believe me in that. My chances have not been of the best, but I have tried to be honest and tell the truth. Except in this case. Except in this. And I was driven to that by my great love and the fear of losing you, if I told you who and what I really am."

"I believe you!" she averred, softly, leaning her head on his manly shoulder. "Tell me all the history of your life, Nicholas. It must have been a strange and sad one. I can readily comprehend why you were induced to conceal it from me. But I do not hate nor despise you for it. You could not help the circumstances surrounding your birth and your early years. And it pleases me to know that since reaching manhood you have shown yourself a man among men. It seems to me you also have much to boast of!"

Never did words sound sweeter; and Nicholas Bouton felt his soul expanding with new feelings as he eagerly drank them in. He, in his ignorance of the qualities of a woman's heart, when that heart is enlisted in the service of love, had expected the announcement of his degrading connection with the despised Romany race would exile him forever from her presence. And, here, he found her ready to sympathize, to appreciate the difficulties which had hedged him in, and to announce her full confidence in his integrity. It was a revelation; and under its influence he told the story of his past, his hopes for the future, and the high resolves that had always animated him.

"And you still love me?" he queried, when he had exposed his whole heart to her gaze. "It does not seem possible, nor indeed right."

"It is both possible and right. Nicholas, I couldn't do anything else, if I wanted to."

"But your father?"

"My father is a sensible man, and will take a sensible view of a matter so nearly concerning my happiness. Trust him for that! I am sure he will feel as I do: that an honorable manhood can not be blackened by the shadows of an unsought and unhappy youth."

CHAPTER XI.

BY PASSIONS TORN.

NELL BUTTON, in applying for the position she held in the merchant's household, had been actuated by quite different motives from those presented to Greg. It will be remembered that his aims were to aid Nicholas in his suit for the hand of the merchant's daughter, and to pave the way for a robbery of the house.

Nell was perfectly willing to assist in the latter object, but she would have held her hand in the fire sooner than do anything to help on the former. For she loved Nicholas in a wild and passionate way that was all her own.

She knew her chances of ever winning him were of the very slenderest, if they existed at all. But while her hopes could never rise high, she was determined that no one else should gain what she could not.

She had entered upon the prosecution of Greg's plans with seeming willingness, believing that opportunities would arise to enable her to poison the mind of her mistress against Nicholas; but those opportunities had not come.

On two or three occasions she had deftly

turned the talk in a direction that appeared hopeful of results, but had been each time silenced.

Hence, when Nicholas went away that night, and from her post of observation behind one of the doors of the corridor she saw that his face was smiling and his step elastic, her rage burst all bounds.

"I'm sure he's told of his love to-night, an' that fool has accepted him!" she hissed, as she crept away to her own room. "But he shall never marry her! I swear it! I'll kill them both, first. Oh, if I could only have heard what he said to her! But I feared to after she opened the door and looked out to see if I was anywhere around."

"You're a-flyin' high, Mr. Nick Button! Most awful high, fer a Romany. But the higher you fly the furer you'll have to fall. That's one comfort. An' when you do come down, it'll be like a bird with both wings shot away!"

There was no sleep for the Romany girl that night. Hour after hour she tossed and moaned, with alternate fits of railing and sobbing. At the first dash of dawn she arose, and began to deck herself in her best finery, coiling her midnight hair in a becoming knot, and placing at her throat a rose plucked from a bush that grew against the window.

As she posed before the mirror, the picture thrown back was indeed a handsome one. The dark, olive cheeks glowed from the fever that burned so fiercely in her veins. Her abundant hair was a dusky, shimmering glory. Her eyes gleamed like stars. No desert queen ever appeared half so regal as this tigress-hearted, Gypsy girl.

"But it won't make him love me!" she panted, pressing a hand heavily against her breast. "Nothing can do that, now. His heart belongs to this namby-pamby thing, that hain't any more color than a sheet, an' no more spirit than a cat. Oh, how I hate her! I could scratch her eyes out, this blessed minute. But he sha'n't marry her! If he won't marry me, he sha'n't marry anybody. I've sworn it; an' a Romany always keeps that kind of an oath."

With these turbulent passions rending her she left the room, descended to the lower floor, and glided like a shadow away through the shrubbery, glancing back now and then to assure herself she had not been observed.

When the principal avenue had been reached she threw aside all efforts at concealment and walked with firm and bold tread into the heart of the city, disdaining such assistance as cable or horse cars afforded.

Nicholas, always an early riser, had just got down to the store, and was seated in his office, ruminating on the events of the previous evening, when, without announcement, she threw open the door and marched in.

"Ah, it's you, Nell!" half-rising and pushing a chair toward her. "You're out early."

He was thinking of how he had seen her at the house of the merchant, and wondering what had induced the call.

"Yes, it's me!" she flashed, disdaining the proffered seat. "You've seen me enough to know me!"

"Certainly!" he said, feeling that a storm was brewing.

"You was up to Crofton's las' night. You know, o' course, that I'm stayin' there now?"

He nodded.

"An' air you goin' to marry that girl?" she demanded, enraged by his quiet. "Tell me that, Nick Button!"

"I wasn't aware, Nell, that you had turned confessor!" and he laughed. "I did hear, though, that you had changed your name; and I've been wondering what it meant."

"Tell me if you're a-goin' to marry that girl!" she reiterated, stamping a foot in her rage.

"Sit down and be sensible! What is it to you whether I am or not? You haven't a right to question me on the subject, anyway. Explain yourself, please! And, for goodness sake, don't talk quite so loud!"

"I hain't any right, hey? Well, mebbe I hain't. But, whether I have er not, I'm goin' to have my say. It's a good 'eal to me whether you marry her or not. You remember what you used to tell me when we were children, Nick? You used to say that when we grewed up you'd make me your wife; an' fer hours we'd talk about the fine things we'd do, while you'd twine roses in my hair, an' poppies an' marry-goolds, and then you'd tell me how purty I looked, and kiss me. Mebbe you've fergot all that, Nick; but I hain't; an' never will."

"Don't be silly, Nell!" he pleaded, a flush mounting to his face. "That was only children's talk you know. I couldn't have been

over ten years old, and you not more than six. I had forgotten it, long ago; and supposed you had done the same."

"You're a Romany, Nick. An' a Romany never fergits!" she asserted. "That is, unless he wants to. Say you fergot it because you wanted to, an' then you'll be tellin' the truth."

"This is nonsense, Nell!" frowning, while the flush deepened. "What's the use of bringing up a past that was only a children's past, and that's dead and buried long ago? Surely, you don't expect me to keep such a promise as that! And, if you do, don't you know I can't and won't? I couldn't make you a good husband and you couldn't make me a good wife. We're not suited for each other in any way. And I trust—sincerely trust, Nell, you haven't allowed yourself to cultivate any such suicidal and foolish attachment as would seem to be indicated by your language."

As he stopped, he saw that the girl was trembling in every limb.

"You're a liar, then, an' a scoundrel, Nick Button!" she asserted. "You said you'd marry me. There hain't any reason why you should forget it, any more'n me, 'cept that you wanted to. No; I didn't s'pose you'd keep your promise! I've seen fer a long time that you didn't care anything fer me. But there's one thing, Nick Button, an' mark it down in your cash book where you'll see it often—you'll never marry this other girl! You're a-foolin' her, jist as you fooled me, a-pretendin' to be somebody. But you'll not fool her any longer. I'll tell her who an' what you air; an' all about you, Nick Button, 'fore another day rolls over my head."

"It won't do you any good, Nell!" a look of pain and pity in his fine face. "I've told her that already. She knows quite as much about me as you do. When I saw you there last night, I feared you had designs against the family or against me; but I never dreamed what they really were. And, so, feeling that I was, as you say, deceiving her, I told her everything."

Nell needed not to ask what the result of the revelation had been. His radiant features, as he left the Crofton place, had testified fully to that.

"You're a liar, Nick Button!" she screamed, beside herself with baffled hate and rage. "You never dared to tell her any such thing. Don't I know these fine ladies too well? She would 'a' sent you out o' that house a deal quicker'n you went in."

"As you please," he said. "And, now, tell me what you mean to do that you've got the place? Work against me, of course! That was part of the plan. But isn't there more to it? If there is, Nell, I want to warn you to be careful. They know who you are, now; for I told that, also. And if anything occurs you'll be at once suspected, and perhaps placed under arrest."

"You tole on me?" she gasped, horrified by what seemed to her a base betrayal, and illogically forgetting her own threats. "Is that like a Romany, Nick?"

"Perhaps not. But I've forgotten some of my Romany lessons, likely, as you seem to be in danger of doing. I knew you were not there for any good. It isn't like you to want to act as maid to any lady; and you'd never do it without some ulterior motive. So, I felt it my duty to inform the family that you were not the person you represented yourself to be. It will lose you the place, maybe, but you won't care for that, if you find out you can't accomplish your ends."

Nell was used to plain speaking, being much given to it herself, and cared little for the words used by Nicholas. But this confession that he had revealed her deceit to her mistress savored so much of treason to the Romany race and Romany traditions that, for a moment, she stood aghast.

"You're the devil's own, Nick Button; and I'll be the death of you for that yet!"

Her voice was hard and tense, and her face flamed. Never had Nicholas seen her so infuriated, and he was well acquainted with her tempestuous moods.

Without another word she faced about and strode from the room and into the street.

There she fairly ran, dodging in and out among the gathering throngs of pedestrians, until she had placed a dozen blocks behind her, and found herself nearing the part of the city where was located the Crofton residence.

"A Romany who will do that deserves death!" she kept repeating over and over. "Ay, he deserves death! And I'll kill him fer it yet. I'll kill him yet! I've sworn it, and I'll do it."

She was fairly out of breath when the house was reached; and disliking to be seen by any one while so furious and angered, she hurried to

her room and bathed her face and head in ice-cold water.

"I look awful!" she said, glancing at her livid face and hollow eyes in the mirror. "Enough to scare all the witches out of the country. But I don't care! Why should I care?"

In this mood she hastened to the apartment of her mistress, who had rung for her several times and was coming to the conclusion that the Gypsy girl had guessed the nature of the previous night's revelations and had taken herself off without giving any warning.

"I have just come from down-town," said Nell, replying to the questions that greeted her. "I've been down to see the young gentleman that was up here last night. The young gentleman that's a-deceivin' of you, ma'am, pertednin' to be an honest chap and calling himself Nicholas Bouton."

Margaret had commanded her to stop, but the Romany girl had no notion of doing anything of the kind until her purpose had been accomplished.

"And which his name is Button, and he's a Gypsy, and his father is an ole horse-trader and a thief, an'—"

"That will do!" cried Margaret, stamping her foot. "Your services will be no longer required. I can't keep a person in my employment who will talk that way. Here is your money."

"Thank you fer nothin', ma'am! Keep your money. I knew I couldn't stay any longer, and I determined to have my say. And, now, I've had it, an' I'm ready to go. But when you're married to Nick Button, the Gypsy, don't forget that you're akin to Greg Button an' Gran Button, an' me! Me—Nell Button! An' that the blood of the Romany will flow in the veins of your children—an' may you have a dozen that'll grow up to be as mean an' wicked as Greg himself!"

With this final shot, she fled down the passage, laughing hysterically, and disappeared from the house.

CHAPTER XII.

AN AERIAL MISHAP.

THE pseudo-confection man had opened out a little shop in a by street not far from the alley and displayed his tempting wares where they could not fail to be seen by the children of the neighborhood. And a frowsy, unkempt neighborhood it was, with noisome, gaping, cellar-like apartments everywhere, to say nothing of the crowded and crowding tenements—and with rickety staircases that constantly creaked and groaned, and gardens which had neither flowers nor vegetables, but seemed to support a strange growth of old shoes and broken bottles and rusty tinware.

Not a very inviting neighborhood, one would say, for the success of the confection business. But these children of poverty had pennies occasionally, and the confection man seemed on the whole very content with his small sales.

He was of the placid, German type, to whom the world always goes easy; and whether business was brisk or dull he smoked his long-stemmed pipe with an air of calm serenity, and hummed occasional snatches of some song of the Fatherland.

Daily Billy Baldor had entered the little cabby-hole of a store and purchased ten cents' worth of something. Frequently he was accompanied by some of the children of the Gypsy band, to whom he turned over his purchases, and once or twice he had appeared with Greg or Gran.

He found it difficult indeed to reconcile this stolid German, with his queer accent and low, easy drawl, with his conceptions of a detective-officer, and was more than once inclined to think that there must be a mistake somewhere, or that he had been made the victim of a deception. But he knew, when recalling all the circumstances, that there was no error, and that the man was there at the command of the chief of police. And this certain knowledge gave to the dwarf a high idea of the task in which he was engaged, and a more determined resolve to prosecute it to the end.

He knew that Nell had been absent a few days from the camp, but though he questioned her concerning the cause and received only evasive replies, he had no notion of the real reason.

Because of the certain belief that he was being watched by the Romanies and by Greg in particular he had taken extra precautions against discovery; and had not, therefore, accomplished as much in the past few days as he should have liked.

One evening, however, when Greg left the

camp at an unusually late hour, he resolved to follow him, let the consequences be what they might. Nell had already left the place, going no one knew whither, and the other Gypsies seemed to be given over to early slumber. He had already lost so much time, through fear of discovery, also, that he felt he could not really lose any more. The chief of police would be expecting some kind of a report from him soon, and therefore he must be up and doing.

It was not a difficult matter to steal away from the place in the trail of Greg, though he almost lost him while changing his garments for the newsboy disguise—a disguise he considered it the part of wisdom to adopt in all such undertakings, his scarlet cloak, even when turned, being too readily distinguishable.

Greg bent his footsteps that night to the business house of Nicholas; and when he reached it, the weasel-like Pygmy was only a few paces in his rear.

The Romany, on knocking, was admitted to the room of the young business man.

"Barred out!" muttered Baldor, wondering how he might follow in safety.

He made the circuit of the building, but saw no way to effect an entrance; and finally resolved to go in by the same door that had admitted Greg. It was a reckless resolve, but it was justified, perhaps, by the result.

The door was not locked, and when he carefully pushed it open he found himself in a narrow hallway connecting with the front part of the store, where lights gleamed in bewildering array. He was on the point of beating a hasty retreat, fearing he should be seen, when the sound of voices, in low conversation, reached him.

"That's Greg's voice, one of them! I'd know it among a thousand. Queer that he should be in a place like this, talking to a business man in his private office. This must be the store of Nicholas, that I've heard so much about."

He crept close to the wall and cowered behind an old fire-screen, which had been tossed there. The voices were now quite distinguishable.

"What made you send Nell up to Crofton's?" he heard one of the men ask.

"Why, Nick, when I couldn't git in there myself I thought that the best thing to do!" the old Romany averred. "You know I said I'd help you in tryin' to git that girl fer your wife, and I was determined to keep my word."

"Yes, it's Nick! He's the 'way-up chap that Greg and Pepper were talking about that night. And he's scheming to marry the daughter of this man Crofton, who's as rich as they make 'em, I've heard, and the old Gypsy's been trying to help him. So, that accounts for where Nell has been. Well, she must have got her walking papers, and a lecture into the bargain, for she's been as cross as a wet hen ever since she came back."

For nearly an hour Greg Button and the young man continued their conversation in that little back office, often sinking their voices so low that the spy could not understand a word. Sometimes the young man seemed to be pleading with the Romany, and at others commanding him; all of which sorely puzzled Baldor.

At last Greg arose and abruptly quitted the apartment, seemingly in anger, and was in the hall before the spy had any time in which to beat a retreat.

"I'm in a bad box, if he sees me!" was Baldor's mental comment as he essayed to squeeze himself into a compact mass behind the screen.

The Romany, however, strode quickly by, without deigning to once look about him.

When he had disappeared, the spy breathed freer, but he did not venture from his place of concealment for several minutes, fearing Greg might be lingering on the outside.

When he stole out, the coast was clear. Many of the lights in the adjacent stores had been extinguished. There were no pedestrians on this side street, though a few were still to be seen on the main thoroughfare.

"It's getting late," Billy whispered, looking carefully about him. "Perhaps I'd better make myself scarce in this vicinity. The young chap may take it into his head to come out this way."

He was on the point of crossing the street, when a slight rustle overhead attracted his attention. Glancing up he saw a man's figure outlined between himself and the sky, and almost directly above him. The man seemed to be walking slowly and carefully, and on air, for the thin, supporting wire was to Billy invisible in the gloom.

The sight was so unexpected and startling that the boy uttered an involuntary cry.

As he did so the wire-walker looked down-

ward, and with a half-scream lost his hold. He caught, however, by his hands, and swayed in a manner that was, to Baldor, terrible and sickening.

"Oh, he will fall and be killed!" he moaned, his heart wrung by the seeming peril of the man's position.

The mysterious form above was writhing in evident pain, plainly showing that in some manner he had been injured by the fall.

"Wrenched his shoulders 'or wrists," thought the boy, his mind becoming active, with a sudden rebound. "He can't help himself."

One of the poles supporting the wire stood near, and toward it the wire-walker was trying to make his way. But he seemingly could not, and Billy could hear the low moans which occasionally escaped his lips.

"I must do something to aid him!" looking anxiously toward the pole. "Maybe if I'd climb up there I might."

He started to dash forward, and half-stumbled over some yielding mass.

"It's a rope!" he muttered, clasp ing it eagerly.

It was a coil of rope, but so frayed and worn and rotten that it had been cast out there as useless.

Nevertheless, Billy hailed it as a solution of the difficulty; and hurried on to the pole, dragging the loose folds after him.

The pole was perfectly smooth and its ascent no easy task; but, made strong and agile by the fears that swayed him, the boy slowly made his way up to the cross-bar to which the wire ran.

All his fears of discovery had vanished and been forgotten. Intent only on aiding the unfortunate he called out:

"Here! Catch this, and slide down it."

"Is that you, Billy?" asked the wire-walker, in a voice so strangely familiar that the boy almost dropped the rope, from the start it gave him. "Pitch the rope out as far as you can."

Billy, with his head whirling from the effects of these words, had yet sufficient control over his nerves to enable him to give the rope a strong and heavy swing that landed the end of it over the wire directly in front of the speaker.

The latter grasped it, moaning in pain as the weight was transferred entirely to the other arm; and speedily had the two ends dangling near the ground. And by the time Billy had regained the earth the other had descended also.

"That can't be you, Nell!" The boy whispered, peering up into the face of the supposed man.

"An' hain't I as much right to go masqueradin' 'bout as Bill Baldor has?" the disguised girl queried, clasp ing her injured wrist. "What made you squawk out like a struck goose when you saw me? What are you doing here, anyhow! Come this way! We'll be seen."

"Knocked the fat plum into the fire, I have, this time!" Baldor muttered, as he obeyed the imperious command. "I'm always buttin' my brains out, tryin' to help people who don't deserve to be helped. But who'd have thought of finding her creeping along a wire at the top of the street?"

"What are you doin' here?" Nell demanded, as soon as they had reached a place of greater security. "And in them clo'es?"

"They're good ones," the boy dryly observed. "I bought 'em of a newsboy who allowed he wouldn't need 'em any more, inasmuch as he was dyin'! And I'd further like to make answer by asking where you got yours? They don't become you, Nell. Take 'em off, when you get home, and don't never put 'em on again."

"Curse that wrist!" holding it up and looking at it. "It's about broke, I do believe. Well, you cheeky thing! I've been spying, if you must know. Spying on that precious Nick Button in there."

"Eh!"

"Yes, eh!" bubbling over with a sudden accession of wrath. "You hain't deaf, Billy! I've been spyin'. What of it? So've you. An' that makes us even, don't it? And neither darst tell on the other!"

"But how did you get up there, and where have you been?" gaspingly.

"Oh, that wire?" and she laughed in an unpleasant way. "That wasn't nothing. I wouldn't have tumbled if you hadn't croaked out and made me think Greg or Nick had discovered me. I used to be a rope-walker. A profess. Followed it off an' on fer years 'fore I ever seen you. More money in it, sometimes, than fortune-tellin'."

Again she stopped and clasped her wrist, giving vent to a spiteful little scream.

"An' I followed Greg to-night, when he told me he was comin' up to have a talk with Nick."

Curses on that Nick! I'm goin' to knife him the first good chance I get."

So wrought up was she by constant brooding on her own woes that she could think of nothing else, and proceeded to babble her dangerous secrets with no more caution than a child, forgetting for the moment to further question Baldor as to the causes that had drawn him thither.

"I thought he meant to marry me, Billy; an' he's talkin' of marryin' that white-faced chit up at Crofton's. But he sha'n't! I've sworn it. I'll kill him first."

Never had Baldor seen her in so maniacal a mood.

"That wouldn't be right, you know!" he urged, in tones meant to be soothing. "Does he care anything for her, or is he just after her money?"

"He loves her!" she asserted, with a low emphasis that was terrible. "And the little fool loves him. If it wasn't for that I might have some chance of winning him from her. Women will cry for love and men will die for it, at least sometimes! Nick shall, anyway. Ha! Ha! There will be one man perished for his lady-love, anyway. And, Billy, you shall write a verse for his tombstone. You're clever at that, hain't you? You ought to be, since you're so clever at everything else."

Baldor was not sure Nell was not losing her sanity, and shuddered at the thought.

"You'd better go home," he pleaded, in a tone plainly betraying his fears.

"Oh, I'm all right, except this wrist. And it's the knife hand, too! But it will be all right to-morrow. You're the one that ought to go home. It's time little chaps like you were in bed. And there! you haven't told me, yet, what you're doin' here!"

She had not seen him emerge from the house; that was quite evident; and Baldor thought a white lie at this time would be better than tons of truthful confession.

"I've been turning a few extra pennies lately, by selling papers. After business hours, you understand. And to do so, rigged up in this style. But I hope you won't say anything about it to Greg. He mightn't like it."

"And you haven't been spying, then? Well, I'll keep mum about the paper bizness, if you'll do the same 'bout this little affair."

"It's a bargain," and Billy solemnly extended his hand.

"The left one!" drawing away the injured right. "Nearest my heart, you know."

And with the hand pressure, she wheeled about and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILD DASH.

BILLY, as he crept back along the deserted streets, could not quell the fears that crowded on him. He had no assurance, he reasoned, that the Gypsy girl would keep the word she had so solemnly given; and if it should come to the ears of Greg that the little fortune-teller had been spying on him, terrible consequences might ensue.

Mingled with these thoughts were reflections concerning the merchant's daughter, of whom he had now heard more than once. From Nell's words it seemed quite plain that here was a genuine love affair; but how could he, then, construe the talk he had only that night heard?

The voice of Nicholas had impressed him favorably. It had held in its accents much that seemed pure and noble, and he was loth to think the owner of such a voice could be a villain.

"I must see the girl!" he commented, when, as the scarlet-cloaked fortune-teller, he was hastening from the tumble-down building where the change had been effected in his clothing. "Yes, I must see her and see what she looks like, and then I'll know whether she's worth any further thought. I don't know that I've any call to cut across lots in this case. No doubt it would be more sensible to keep in the middle of the road and let Greg and Nick and the rest of them go hang, as far as this matter is concerned. I'm hunting for the murderer of John Fenton; or, at least, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. But, somehow, I can't keep my hand off this other affair."

"Phew! But wasn't Nell in a stew to-night. She's equal to a she tiger, with eyes a-shining and claws a-sticking out! If she makes up her mind to pop a knife into the back of Mr. Nicholas, I'm mightily afraid he'll do it. I wouldn't have her after me that way for the love of all the fluttering angels that ever blinded the eyes of men."

With this sage comment he reached the camp, and crept stealthily into the tent which he usually occupied alone.

"There's a woman up town who wants her fortune told," he declared to Gran, the next evening. "I think she'll pay well, and I'm going up to scan the beauty's hand and tell her that her lover loves her, all for the sum of a dollar or two, and that she shall have happiness and horses, and jewels and cash galore. You are welcome to rake in any shekels that may make their appearance here in the interval."

The old crone protested slightly, but, as Greg and Nell were both away the boy paid little heed to the protest, and soon after took his departure.

It was scarcely dark when he left the camp, and he was painfully aware that the danger of discovery was much increased thereby. But he realized, also, that if he wished to obtain a conference with, or even a sight of, Margaret Crofton, he must make his appearance at the Crofton residence before the shades of night had fully fallen.

He visited the confection man first and made his usual purchase, and then crept away to change his clothing; and succeeded in escaping from the neighborhood without discovery.

A directory had given the street and number, and he experienced no difficulty in finding the place.

Proceeding to the rear entrance he boldly inquired for the lady of the house.

"She can't see the likes o' ye!" the servant made answer.

"She might, you know, if she'd look!" Baldor averred, extending a shining silver piece. "Don't you think so, my good friend? Is it worth that to just step out of the way and not see me, yourself?"

The servant evidently thought it was; for he slipped the coin into his pocket, and whistled a jolly air as he hastened off.

"Now, if I can only find her without too much trouble! I'll be taken for a house-breaker, I suppose, if I'm caught prowling."

The young lady's voice directed him, however. She was seated at the piano, drumming and singing in a thoughtful way; and thus directed, Billy advanced boldly.

On gaining the door, which stood somewhat ajar, he coughed slightly to attract her attention, and then strode into the apartment, hat in hand, and with a very obsequious bow.

She stared hard at him for an instant, and seemed on the point of calling a servant.

"Allow me to tell your fortune, good lady!" he pleaded.

"Who are you, and how did you get in here?" she gasped.

"I'm a Gypsy, lady; and I came in by the rear door. I thought you might wish your fortune told."

He was studying every lineament of her face as he spoke, and endeavoring from it to fathom her character. Never had he beheld a countenance more expressive of womanly purity and goodness.

She recoiled slightly at the word "Gypsy."

"I ought to call a servant and have you ejected," she exclaimed. "But you're only a boy! Don't you know it's very impertinent, though, to enter a house, without consent, as you have done? Impertinent, and criminal?"

Baldor bowed almost to the floor.

"Pray pardon me, lady! My intentions are of the best. You have a good face and a kind heart. I will go, though, if you do not wish me to remain."

"What a strange, little creature you are!" laughing. "I suppose I ought to tell you to go. But, I'm curious to know what you can do at fortune-telling. Not that I believe you know anything more of the future than I do! Are you acquainted with a Gypsy girl called Nell Button?"

"All Gypsies are more or less acquainted with each other," was the evasive reply.

"I'm afraid of Gypsies," and she shuddered. "Not that all are base and deceptive, though I fear most of them are."

"Many are good," averred Baldor. "You do not like my appearance, I see. I do not blame you; and I will go."

"Then, you are not good at guessing, however good you may be at foretelling the future. Your face seems bright and truthful. Your fortunes are as pleasant, I presume."

"Your hand!" advancing to seize the golden opportunity.

She extended it in a laughing manner, seeming at the same time half-ashamed of the action.

"One like you surely can have nothing but a good fortune!" and he lifted the rosy finger-

tips to his lips. "And it is a good fortune I foresee."

"You have a lover, lady, who loves you as the humming-bird loves the lilies, as the flowers love the sunshine, as the mountains love the sky. And you return that love. There are traces of shadows, too, but they shall be cleared away; and the dreams that haunt you shall become realities."

She flushed and withdrew the hand.

"That will do! You are a base flatterer, like all the rest."

"Shall I not go on?" he asked.

"No! The picture is a bright one and I would have it remain just that way. If you proceed, you may take it into your wise little head to lay on somber colors before the close. I understand, of course, that you weave the pleasant or unpleasant fictions as you go; and I always prefer that all the romances I read or hear shall end well."

She took from her purse a coin of the same denomination as the one Baldor had given the servant, and dropped it in his palm; and understanding this as a dismissal he retreated toward the door.

"Let me ring for a servant to show you down!" and she reached for the button.

"No!" he exclaimed, putting out a hand. "I prefer to slip out as I came in. I shall disturb nothing."

He darted into the corridor before she could reply, and heard the echoing of the bell, which she had rung in spite of his protest.

It would have been the part of wisdom for the dwarf to have retreated to the apartment he had just quitted and to have there awaited the servant's arrival. By so doing a ludicrous *contre-temps* would have been avoided.

Instead, he darted toward the front entrance, intent on making his way out without any such assistance. His principal reason for doing so was a desire to escape general observation, inasmuch as he could not be sure that Nell or Greg were not on terms of intimacy with some of the *attaches* of the place, and might thus learn of his visit.

As it was the servant gained the entrance to the corridor just in time to catch a view of Baldor's vanishing coat-tails, and being convinced that something terrible had happened, he screamed out a general alarm.

"I'm in for it now!" the Pygmy muttered, bounding down the stairway. "That fool's yelling like the house was afire. If they catch me they'll beat me half to death before I can make an explanation, or before the lady can come to my assistance."

He could hear the patter of feet everywhere, all converging toward him; and when, having gained the outside, he attempted to escape by racing along the walk, he found the passage blocked.

"Hyer he goes!" one of the men yelled, as the dwarf changed his line of flight and darted into the shrubbery. "Head him off over there, will ye? It's a boy, an' he's been a-stealin' something."

Thus warned, Baldor again shifted his course. But, though he avoided the peril that threatened, he found himself closely pursued by two panting servants, who had come suddenly on him from another direction.

He was remarkably fleet of foot, but their long strides gave them great advantage, and he felt that he must soon be overhauled. Hence, when he gained the street, he darted into the first opening that presented.

This proved to be a stairway, mounting to unknown heights; and as Billy bounded up, women popped their heads from doorways opening on the hall, and screamed at him like a nest of frightened macaws.

He gained the top, however, without mishap, and scrambling through an open window descended by a fire-ladder to a roof lower down.

Here no sounds of pursuit reached him, and feeling thoroughly fagged, he dropped behind a projecting flue and awaited developments.

After a little he heard some one advance to the window, and knew the roof was being scanned for traces of him. But the watcher left shortly, and Billy was again alone.

"Oh, for the wings of the morning that I might fly—fly—most any place, so I didn't land too hard!" glancing anxiously around. "How I'm to get down from here without coming in range of those over-zealous servants, puzzles me!"

Creeping like a shadow, he passed across the roof. When he had gained the opposite side he saw below him a stairway that mounted from the outside of the building. It could not be reached, however, from where he was, but on

looking about he noticed that a lightning-rod, which projected from the roof near him, passed in its descent within a foot of this staircase, or fire-escape.

"Nell could go down that," scanning it thoughtfully, "and why shouldn't I? I can, and I will!"

With this resolve he swung himself over the edge of the roof, and clinging to the twisted rod with hands and feet, slowly lowered himself. The feat was much easier of accomplishment than he had thought, and the staircase, or ladder series, as it really was, was gained without mishap.

Here he rested awhile and listened for any sound which might indicate the search was still being prosecuted. Hearing nothing, he descended, and quickly dropped from the first-story platform into the street, and mingling with the throng soon made his way from the vicinity.

CHAPTER XIV.

THROUGH A SKYLIGHT.

"WELL, that was a go!" thought little Baldor, with much disgust, as he hastened in the direction of the Gypsy camp. "To be chased like a felon out of the house, when I went there with the best of intentions, I reckon I'd better attend strictly to this John Fenton business, and let outside issues alone. It looks that way, to a man up a tree—or on a house-top!"

Yet, notwithstanding this feeling, the Pygmy found his mind drawn constantly toward Margaret Crofton, and toward Nicholas; and, not at all understanding what the old Romany, Greg, was up to, he resolved to watch him more closely than ever, if that were possible.

As he approached the alley he saw a man advancing through it. Thinking the form familiar, the dwarf awaited, in concealment, the fellow's approach.

A closer view left no further doubt. That shaggy head, those stooping shoulders, could belong to none save the cracksman, Pepper Smith.

Although pretty well tired out with the exertions of the evening, Pepper's appearance at that time and place aroused the dwarf's curiosity, and he resolved to follow him. He was the more impelled to this by the feeling that in attending to these outside issues he had been neglecting the principal quest.

The cracksman's ordinary gait was a crouching, stealthy one, to which he had become habituated, probably, by his long career of thieving and general villainy; and as he glided by the concealed dwarf, his footsteps made scarcely more sound than the falling of autumn leaves.

Silent, however, as the cracksman was, his movements were not more noiseless than those of the Pygmy who crept after him.

Pepper seemed to avoid the principal avenues, sticking to the back streets and byways, as if he feared the glare of the electric lights. For this Baldor was duly grateful, as it enabled him to keep closer to the skulking scoundrel and greatly lessened the chances of discovery.

The villain put almost a mile behind him before he came to a halt. The place was a densely populated section of the tenement quarter, with filth, squalor and misery everywhere visible. There were many men and women in the ill-lighted street.

Hesitating a moment Pepper applied a key to a lock and entered a door, beyond which was revealed a narrow and dirty stairway. Then Billy heard him shuffling up the creaky steps; and a little later saw a faint light reflected against a wall higher up and knew that the man had entered one of the upper rooms and lighted a smoky lamp, the gleam of which reached the high wall through a skylight.

The appearance of the brutal men in the short street was not reassuring, and he resolved not to go among them if they could be avoided. How to reach the room to which Pepper had ascended without doing so seemed a difficult problem.

As he crouched in the shadows turning this question over in his mind, the faint flicker of the light on the wall and the events of his recent escape suggested a solution. He could probably mount to the roof of a building and survey the interior of Pepper's room from above.

"But, why take that risk?" he queried, and was about to settle down to the simple task of watching the house, when the coming of another person reawakened his interest.

This was Greg Button, the Romany; and as he disappeared through the door which had shut Pepper from the gaze of the boy, the latter resolved to discover the meaning of these mysterious movements.

There was no way by which the roof of the house could be reached from the front, and Baldor, accordingly hurried to the rear, where a stairway led into the large building. Some children were playing in the dirt before it, however, and the way seemed thus blocked.

Buttoning his coat closely about him and pulling his hat well over his eyes he appeared suddenly before them.

"Want some candy?" he queried, taking from a pocket the package of confections he had purchased that evening from the pretended Gorman. "Here! Let's see you race for it, then! The one that gets the most can have all he gets."

The children had clustered about him, their eyes sparkling at sight of the dainties exhibited. Then, with a quick toss, he scattered the contents of the package in all directions. A wild scramble instantly followed; and while it was at its height he slipped into the stairway and began to mount silently toward the second floor.

There was no one on this floor to bar his further progress, and he ascended in the same way to the third. Here, from a window, he looked down on the faint light that came up from the room occupied by Greg and Pepper.

There was no lightning-rod to aid him in a descent. The stairway, however—having been constructed after the window had been set in—ran along the upper sash. Out of this upper half of the window Baldor was peering, the entire lower sash being below the line of the stairway.

This seemed to present a solution of the difficulty.

Drawing down the upper half, he climbed to the outside, and by holding firmly to the top lowered himself to the window ledge; and from this leaped lightly to the almost flat roof. Before doing so, however, he had pushed the upper sash into place and felt quite sure no one would ever fancy a descent could be made by that route.

It was now a comparatively easy task to creep into position near the skylight and survey the interior of the apartment occupied by Pepper and Greg.

The two were alone—Greg smoking his pipe, and Pepper with chair tipped against the wall in an easy attitude. And they were talking.

"I tell you, Pep, on'y when that's done will I feel like I'm paid fer all these years o' watchin' an' schemin'." Crofton may think I've fergot. No doubt he does; but he never made a bigger mistake. I'll never fergit that while my head's hot. An', blast his eyes, he'll have plenty cause to recollect it, too, 'fore long!"

Baldor, with his nose flattened against the glass, could not see the vicious snapping of black orbs which accompanied the words, but he heard the low, clicking sound with which the threat was emphasized, and knew the Romany was terribly in earnest.

"Yes, he'll pay fer it, in tears an' blood! They can't be any doubt that the young folks'll marry. I was snoopin' 'roun' the house t'other night, an' heard their chatter. Jist like two turtle-coves, Pep, fer all the worl'! The lovin'-est, dovin'-est couple you ever see in all your borned days!"

"Then, you've got him, I reckon!" and Pepper lifted his shoulders with one of his expressive shrugs. "Got him an' them, too!"

"You can jist gamble that I have, Pep! He ain't dreamin' of anything like that!"

"What can they be driving at?" and Baldor flattened his nose so recklessly that it seemed he must push the glass through. "Blest if I can make head or tail of it. Seems the old Rom is laying up some kind of a club for Crofton."

The worthies below indulged in much more of the same sort of talk, but the listener could not get the thread of the conversation sufficiently to determine what it meant. One thing seemed certain; the Romany held some cause of bitter hatred against the merchant, and was resolved to square accounts by a terrible vengeance.

Finally Greg knocked the ashes from his pipe and arose to go. When he had departed, Pepper threw himself on the bed in a half-dressed condition and endeavored to compose himself for slumber.

"I suppose I'll not learn anything more to-night," mused the spy, still peering through the skylight. "And I'd feel better if I knew just how I'm to get down from this roof. I can't very well climb up to the window, owing to the distance and the abbreviated condition of my stature, and I can't jump from the roof."

A solution entirely unlooked for came quickly. In rising to his feet he stepped incautiously on an old broom-handle which he had not before

observed, and was shot with great violence upon the skylight. There was a fearful crash and shivering of glass, as the roof spy plunged bodily through into the cracksman's den.

The bed which held the sleeping cracksman was directly beneath the skylight, and into the middle of it he plumped, landing perilously near Pepper's body. This broke the force of the fall, for the bed was provided with a bulky, old-fashioned feather-tick, into which he sunk half-up to his knees.

A hail of broken glass and splinters accompanied him; and a more startled and frightened rascal than Pepper would be hard to imagine. With a howl he leaped to the floor, and made a wild dash for the stairway, hatless and coatless and with hair in wild disorder.

Baldor was almost equally frightened by this unexpected disaster; but was, nevertheless, quick to see and seize the advantage gained.

"Shoot him!" he shouted, in tones as hoarse as he could command. "Don't let him get away. Fifty dollars to the man that first puts hands on him!"

This was all that was necessary to add wings to the feet of the terrified cracksman, and he went down the stairs with the speed of a belated Express train.

"Now, it's my time, and I must make hay while the sun's shining," and forthwith the dwarf was diving down the stairway, three steps at a time, and with as much apparent recklessness as had been shown by Pepper.

When the street was gained the fleeing Pepper was nowhere to be seen, but heads were being popped from windows in the neighborhood, and shrill questions concerning the cause of the excitement were being hurled back and forth.

And feeling that delay was perilous in the extreme, Baldor raced away through the night.

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

WHEN the dwarf gained the vicinity of the Gypsy camp, having previously divested himself of his newsboy disguise, he was somewhat astonished to see a light faintly burning in Greg's tent.

The Romanies were given to night prowling, but it was unusual for them to sit up late, when once they had returned from their surreptitious strolls. The sight of the low-burning lamp, therefore, naturally kindled the boy's curiosity, and he crawled close up under the shadow of the tent to discover its meaning.

There were only two persons in the tent, he decided, after close listening and a study of the shadows thrown on the dirty canvas by the smoky flame. They were Greg and Gran, and their first words had been sufficient to rivet his attention.

"I do' know what to do wi' that boy!" Gran mumbled. "You tell me to make 'im stay hyer, but he jis' won't, an' that's the eend. He won't listen to me w'en I tells him not ter. Not a word, he won't."

"I don't like the way he's a-trapsein' 'round!" Greg growled. "We do' know what he's up to. I 'low we'd best ship him soon. If he sh'ud be a-spyin'!"

"But the fortunes!" whined the hag. "He do bring in a power o' siller. Five dollars this very day!"

"Mebbe we can keep him!" was the comforting response. "As soon as I git through with this other biz, I'm a-goin' to pull out of hyer, anyhow. But I can't go till that's settled, and I see Crofton with his face in the dust."

"Twill be a s'prise!" Gran crooned, swaying her skinny form back and forth.

"Twill be revenge!" Greg grated. "The revenge that I've been plannin' an' waitin' fer all these years. I don't think that's b'en out o' my thoughts a single day nor out o' my dreams a single night sence the start. An' now, it's comin'! Comin' fast as the days can roll!"

The gloating words were expressive of the spirit of a fiend.

"How be you a-goin' to work it?" Gran queried, after a longer silence than usual.

"It will 'most work itself!" clucked Greg. "The young fools is rusbin' toward matrimony fast as I could ask. Frum what I heard t'other night, they've got the day set a'ready. Let 'em rush! They do' know what's afore 'em."

He stopped as if to enjoy the vision he had conjured, and his cluckings came so thick and fast they sounded like a low, wheezy whistle.

"No! That they don't. An' Crofton hain't the mistest of an idee either that they're reely brother an' sister. He can't never dream of sich. But they air, Gran. We know that they air, if they don't, an' if Crofton don't."

Baldor gave such a start that for a moment

he feared he had brought discovery and confusion on his head.

"Brother and sister!" he panted, as if he could not credit the words his ears had caught. "It can't be! It surely can't be!"

"Crofton's forgot the time he had me chucked into jail on the charge of bein' a vag. He's forgot it long ago. But I'll warrant he ain't never forgot how his boy was stole away that same summer, an' how he hain't never heard from him again. I s'pose he thinks the boy's dead fore now. But he hain't, Gran. You an' me, know he hain't."

Gran made no reply to this, but Baldor could see her bowed head and swaying body outlined by the dirty canvas, and knew she was listening intently to every word.

"He had no idee that the vag he stuck in jail was he same feller that carried off his boy. If he had, I 'low that vag would 'a' been swung up by the neck. It do me good, Gran, jist to think it all over:

"The boy was a-playin' in the street, to'rst evenin', a month mebbe after the vag got out o' jail. An' they was a feller what looked powerful like the vag a-sittin' on the curbstone. An' says this feller, a-holdin' out an orange, an' a-lookin' as sweet as m'lasses pie: 'Wouldn't you like to have this byer, sonny?'

"An', then, when the little 'un said as he would, this feller what looked like the vag backed into the alley, an' held the orange up temptin' er'n ever, an' tole the little 'un to come an' git it, if he wanted it reel bad.

"An' the little 'un come jis 'a-toddlin'; an' they was a wagon in that alley; an' into it he was put, orange an' all; an' away the vag scooted with 'im."

"The scoundrell!" muttered Baldor, shaking his fist at the shadows on the canvas.

"Yes," continued the Romany, a perfect torrent of clucks tumbling over each other in their haste to steal out and show what a jolly heart they had come from, "the feller what looked like a vag scooted with him!"

"An' then wasn't they a lot o' yow-yowing an' ki-yiin' in that neighborhood soon after? The old man what had put the vag in jail he tore his hair and pranced; an' the ole 'oman she took ou 'sif she'd been sent fer; an' the p'lice they run this way an' that; and the newspapers they writ speeches tellin' how it had been done, an' how the abductors could be caught; an' altogether 'twas a great time.

"But they didn't find the man what looked like the vag, an' they ha'n't found him git. Fer the vag didn't stay in that vicinity after that. But he went to rovin', an' he fetched the boy up as his'n, an' when he'd growed up to be a likely lad he sent him off to school an' give 'im an ejication.

"But long 'fore that the ole 'oman died, broke her heart they said; an' the ole man'll wish he'd 'a' died the same way, I'm thinking, when he knows what we know.

"An' the boy went into bizness—fer he had the Crofton head fer that—an' now he's got a slam-up, fine store, all his own; an' he's a-goin' to marry the Crofton girl, what's reely his sister. It do beat the world how things will work roun', Gran, if you'll on'y give 'em time an' a push now an' then.

"I say it, what ought to know, fer I've worked this hull bizness frum beginnin' to end. An' the fools can't see that the vag's been a-leadin' 'em all the time."

Another series of clucks gave Baldor a chance to again wave his fist menacingly at the shadows.

"'Twas me that fu'st tole Nick to hitch up to the ole man, fer the sake o' the bizness he was in. An' when he done that the rest come jist as natcherel as water slippin' down hill. I knowed it would, an' it did.

"An', now, there's to be a weddin', jist as I figgered they must be! An' when that weddin's over! Do you know what I mean to do then, Gran?"

The bag bobbed her head negatively.

"I'm a-goin' to march into that parlor, says the spider to the fly, an' I'm a-goin' to tell the ole man jist what's come to pass; an' I'm a-goin' to tell him that I'm the vag; an' I'm a-goin' to pitch down 'fore him the very clothes what 'the kid wore when he was abducted; an' then, when he falls in a fit or goes to tearin' his hair, I'm goin' to slide. An' then, Gran, these byer parts won't never see us again."

"The old villain!" Baldor exclaimed, beneath his breath. "If there was ever a man needed hanging, he's the man."

"Yes," said the Romany, breaking in again, "then we'll slide. An' the turkle doves 'll be

off on their honeymoon; an' the ol' man, when he knows it all, an' realizes that it's been the work o' the vag, 'll be off fer a 'sylum. Either that, er he'll drown hisself! I hain't keerin' much which, though I b'leeve I'd rather he'd go to the 'sylum. 'Twould be lastin'er than jist drownin'."

Baldor's distress and anger were so great he could hardly contain his feelings. His visit to the Crofton residence and interview with Margaret had given him a high opinion of that young lady's purity and goodness. Her father he had never seen. Neither had he seen Nicholas. But the tones of the latter's voice had impressed him favorably, which, coupled with the revelations of the Gypsy girl, Nell, had gained his good will.

He had heard enough to keep him awake the remainder of the night, and give him food for uneasy reflection. Already he was cogitating how he could warn Crofton of the facts he had thus learned. Greg had lapsed into silence, and Gran was moving about as if contemplating retiring.

"I'd better get into bed as quick as I can!" he commented, backing from the dangerous vicinity.

He had, from the start, insisted on having a small tent reserved for his exclusive occupancy, and toward this he hastened; and, ten minutes later, when Greg lifted the flap and peered in to ascertain if the young fortune-teller had returned, Baldor was apparently buried in the most profound slumber.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEAUTY MADDENED.

NEAR morning, and after hours of troubled tossing, Billy dropped into a dream-disturbed slumber, from which he was aroused by the sounds of angry words in Greg's tent.

The sun was shining brightly through the half-open flap of canvas, and the warmth of his rays showed that the day was considerably advanced.

"Gimme that knife, Gran!" came the words, in the sharp, quick tones of the Gypsy girl. "What bizness had you to take it out o' my pocket las' night, I'd like to know, anyway? That's my knife, an' I want you to jist hand it over!"

"What be you goin' to do wi' it, Nell?" the hag crooned. "Tell me that, an' then mebbe I will."

"Tain't none o' yer bizness, an' I want that knife!"

"You be goin' to hurt somebody, Nell!" protestingly.

"Yes, I am, if I git a good chance!"

"Not our Nick?"

"Gimme that knife, I say, or it'll be you!"

From the scuffling sound that followed Billy knew she had leaped on the old crone and was endeavoring to wrench the weapon from her grasp.

"Yes, it's Nick!" pantingly and triumphantly, a moment later. "I'm goin' to put that in his heart, if he don't promise to let that girl go, you hear me!"

Then Nell hurried from the tent; and when Billy hastily dressed and went out, she was nowhere to be seen.

He feared to question Gran as to the direction she had taken, though he felt almost sure it had been toward town, and on evil bent. He greatly wished to follow her, and would have done so, doubtless, if two women of the lower order had not made their appearance at that instant with a request that he tell them their fortunes.

Before he was through with them others appeared, and from that hour until nightfall he found not a chance to leave the place. Business in his line had never seemed brisker, greatly to his disgust.

It was remarked by many that the fortunes that day were not of the best, and the lifting of the veil of the past was not done with the delicate accuracy of other days. The fortune-teller, too, was given to abstractions and fits of forgetfulness, together with turns of brusqueness that were not pleasing.

Nell had returned before noon, and from her manner Baldor shrewdly guessed she had not found an opportunity to put her murderous plan in execution. She talked much to Gran, and the latter wasted her crooning eloquence on the maddened creature without appreciable effect.

As for Greg he had been away the entire day. "You ain't goin' out ag'in!" Gran coaxed, as darkness set in. "It'll be murder, Nell, if you do what you was talkin' 'bout; an' you know what that means."

But Nell was in a reckless mood; and casting

Gran off angrily, marched out into the thicker gloom.

"Hain't I better foller her?" Baldor asked, coming forward at that moment. "I happened to hear what you said, Gran. If she's going to hurt somebody she ought to be stopped. It will get us all into trouble."

"So 'twill!" Gran moaned. "Oh, I do know what to do wi' her! I reely don't. If Greg was on'y here!"

"But he isn't!" the dwarf urged. "I might run across him, though down town. Who is she mad at?"

"Nick! Nicholas Bouton, what keeps the big store next to the corner of Twelfth an' Walnut. She says he promised to marry her, an' won't do it; an' she's a-goin' to stab him!"

"Then I'll go!" and Billy, fearing she might try to prevent him from doing so, tossed down his tall cap, replaced it with the light straw one he sometimes wore, and raced away in the direction Nell had taken.

The angry girl had proceeded rapidly, and he did not come in sight of her until the store had been almost gained. He had not changed his suit for the newsboy outfit, convinced it was not best, under present circumstances, and not having had time, even if so inclined.

Nell was standing near the building, glaring at the doorways, and clutching the concealed knife in the folds of her light shawl, when Baldor rushed up to her.

"Gran told me to foller you!" he gasped. "You don't really mean to do what you've been threatening, Nell?"

She turned on him with an angry snarl.

"Don't I? Then that shows you don't know me, Billy Baldor. Jist wait till I git a good chance an' see!"

"But, you'll be arrested, and get us all into difficulty!" he protested. "You're crazy, Nell, to think of such a thing. Do you suppose you could go into that store and stab the proprietor and make your escape? It's the wildest nonsense. You'd be in jail in less than an hour, even if you succeeded in getting out of the building."

"What do I care for their jails?" sneeringly.

"They wouldn't hang a woman! An' even if they did, I'd still have my revenge. They couldn't ondo that."

"If you don't say you'll give up this business and promise to throw away that knife and go home, I'll call a policeman and tell him to take charge of you!" Baldor threatened.

The threat had scarcely been made when she gave a convulsive start, and leaned yearningly toward the nearest doorway; and Billy, following her gaze, saw Nicholas enter the building.

"You will, will you? Take that, fer a med-dlin', little interlop-er! An' it'll be the knife, next time!"

She struck him so quickly and violently that he fell sprawling. Before he could rise she had rushed around the building toward the rear entrance and disappeared.

"I must follow her!" he commented, scrambling instantly to his feet. "If I can get near her before she has time to do him an injury I can stop her in one way!"

That one way had been constantly in his thoughts since leaving the camp. It was to tell her what he had heard the previous evening. The knowledge that the lovers were really brother and sister would of necessity remove all cause of hatred and anger on her part. They could not marry, when the truth was made known; and all that would be necessary to prevent the threatened wedding would be to acquaint Nicholas with the facts.

Yet this he had hesitated to do. It would reveal him in his true character, and perhaps sacrifice the great stake for which he had been playing. Yet this he was willing to do, rather than that a second murder should be committed.

Running as fast as his short legs could carry him he reached the rear door, which stood ajar, and darted through.

Nell was standing within the passage, clutching the dagger, and attempting to peer into the room of Nicholas.

"Here! Stop!" Baldor shouted, rushing forward.

At the sound of his voice Nell dashed into the room, with the dagger uplifted to strike—Billy at her heels.

"Take that!" she cried, aiming a blow at the young man, who was seated at a desk, having apparently been bending over a big book; but the words of Baldor had aroused him, and he did not fall the easy victim that Nell had imagined.

As the blow descended he caught her by the knife hand, and averted the point of the deadly blade.

When a fearful struggle ensued. The girl was strong and lithe as a panther, and was rendered as fierce by the arrest of her plans. She writhed and twisted, clinging desperately to the knife; and had not Baldor come to the young man's assistance by clasping her by the feet so that she stumbled and fell, the conflict might have had a different termination.

Naturally the sounds of the struggle penetrated to the store room, and the clerks were heard hurrying toward the apartment of their employer. When they reached it, however, there was no need for their services.

Nell was on the floor, railing and weeping with vindictive bitterness, and alternately cursing Nicholas and Baldor.

"Leave us alone!" Nicholas commanded. "I will explain directly."

At this the wondering clerks withdrew. "You are the little fortune-teller I have heard about?" turning with the question on the dwarf. "Be so good as to say nothing about this unfortunate affair."

Then he arose, thrust the dagger into the open desk before him, and taking Nell by the hand, drew her gently from the room. Baldor was on the point of following, but he motioned him back.

"I will see her safely to the camp. You may follow at your leisure."

All through the long hours of the day the dwarf had been thinking how he might communicate to the young man what he had heard the previous night from the lips of the old Romany. But he dared not open his lips on the subject in Nell's presence.

He followed them into the street and saw them swallowed up in the hurrying throng; then he sat down on the curbstone to try to hit upon a plan that would answer and at the same time not reveal that he had been the bearer of the news.

"Why not write him a letter?" he asked, his face suddenly clearing. "The very thing! I wonder I did not think of it before."

With this resolve, he crept back into Nicholas's room, took up pen and paper, and began his self-imposed task. Disguising his penmanship as much as possible he wrote the following:

"MR. NICKLUS BOUTON:—
"DEER SIR:—I know a thing wich wil gratly sprise you, I'm shore. You air own bruther of the wummun you air agoin to marry. Youd beter luk into this, fore you go enny furdur. A word to the wise. Fer pitiklers inquire of Mr. Greg Button.
"A FRIEND."

The words were purposely misspelled. Reading the strange epistle over with great care, and feeling sure it would be sufficient to arouse the young man's curiosity and provoke an investigation which would reveal the truth, Baldor placed it on the desk and stole cautiously from the room, without any of the clerks having become aware that he had returned to it.

He had no sooner left the room, however, than a vagrant wind brought about a complete miscarriage of the scheme. The eddying air picked up the scrap of paper and whirled it into the hall, where for a time it lay fluttering. Then it was swept into the street, and trampled into an unrecognizable state beneath the heels of a passing horse.

All unaware of this, Baldor bent his way in a homeward direction, thinking of the occurrences of the night. He had not expected to come upon Nicholas and Nell, believing them far in advance. But the willful girl, once the street had been gained, had been harder to manage than Nicholas had expected, and progress was thus made slow.

They were engaged in a wordy altercation when the dwarf came in sight of them; and while he watched, wonderidg what would be the result, Nell suddenly wrenched her arm from the detaining hand of the young man and darted wildly away.

For an instant it seemed Nicholas contemplated a pursuit. But he turned about, and with a pained look on his face and head bowed, began slowly to retrace his steps.

CHAPTER XVII.

CROWDING TO A CRISIS.

THE failure of her vengeful plans threw Nell Button into a state of hysterical terror; and Nicholas's imperious manner as he led her from the room did not tend to quiet and reassure her.

"Do you think I can passively submit to such things as this?" he questioned, wrathfully. "I've a kindly feeling for you, Nell, but you've gone beyond all bounds this evening. I'm sure you must realize that, yourself."

"What air you goin' to do with me?" she panted, striving to draw away her hand.

"I shall try to contrive a way to prevent a recurrence of this murderous attempt!" with bitter emphasis. "You shall go with me to the camp, and if Greg can't find a way to keep you there, then I'll have to appeal to the law for protection."

The words were most unfortunate; but Nicholas was so vexed and enraged by her acts that he did not stop to measure his utterances or think of their probable effect.

She was silent for a time and apparently submissive, only to break out with a torrent of bitter remonstrance and invective.

"I hain't a-goin' to the camp with you!" she declared, stopping short. "Greg 'll want to tie me up till this hyer weddin's over. I hain't a-goin', I say. I hain't a-goin'!"

She fairly shrieked the last; and wrenching her hand away, fled like a deer.

Thinking she would be instantly pursued, and that in all probability Nicholas would call the police force to his aid, she darted into an alley and ran till she was exhausted; then, when she could go no further, she crept among some boxes for concealment and tried to compose herself sufficiently to think.

With all her apparent recklessness she had an instinctive dread of the minions of the law. What punishment might be meted out to her for this attempt on the life of Nicholas she did not know. It would be imprisonment, certainly, and perhaps worse. And to be forced to lie within the gloomy walls of a jail, denied the bright sunshine and the gladness of the outer world, meant little less than death to this wild Romany girl.

"They sha'n't take me!" she gasped. "I'll kill myself, first."

She buried her face in her hands and moaned out her disappointment, her griefs and her fears, but as the gloom increased, she began to feel more secure; and, rising, bent her steps cautiously in the direction of the rendezvous at the dog fancier's.

When she reached it, Kennedy was sitting in his accustomed place on the steps, smoking.

"Let me in, Jim! Quick!" she whispered, gliding forward.

Kennedy started and glared around, but seeing no one in pursuit, got up and unbolted the door, and permitted her to enter, following a little later, himself.

"What's up?" he queried, uneasily. "Hain't had the p'lices after ye?"

"Yes! That is, I don't know!" and she shivered.

"Best come this way, then!" with energetic promptness, striding in advance of her along the hall.

She followed, glad to find some one, even this grim and cruel wretch, who seemed to sympathize with her and understand her needs. Down the rickety stairway they went, Kennedy finally stopping in front of a secret door in the apparently solid wall.

"Go in there," he said, after touching a secret spring which caused the door to swing inward. "Nobody won't find this den in a hurry. Now, what ye been doin' anyway, to git the cops after ye?"

It was a dismal and uninviting place which the inward swinging of the door had revealed.

"I don't want to go in there!" she protested, drawing back.

"Why not?" Kennedy growled. "Better than bein' 'rested."

"Well, I hain't goin' in! So, there now!"

"Well, you're a rum 'un, Nell! Hanged if you ain't. Run hyer fer me to hide ye, an' then won't lemme after ye githyer. What's the cops wantin' ye fer, anyway?"

"Cause I tried to stab Nick!" turning angrily on him.

The dog fancier fell back a step in dismay.

"Best hustle yerself in there then, girl. You'll be sent up fer it if you're ketched."

"I won't!" she declared, resolutely. "I'd as soon go to jail as in there. Why, Jim, that hole'd make me ravin' crazy in less'n an hour. I'm purt' near it now, as it is!"

Kennedy needed but to glance into her staring and bloodshot eyes to realize she was speaking the truth.

"Well, then, you needn't. Stay in one o' the rooms above. I'll watch; an' if the cops should come, ye can dive in hyer till they're out o' the way."

She followed him mechanically as he retraced his way; and when the upper floor was gained and he pointed out a room, she entered it and dropped heavily into a chair.

"I'd hate to have 'em track her hyer!" Kennedy growled, as he went into the front room to

begin his vigil. "But I couldn't turn one o' the gang away."

An hour passed, and having heard nothing to alarm him, he went into the room he had assigned her to see how she was standing her immurement.

To his surprise, he found it vacated. Full twenty minutes before, feeling she could no longer endure the suspense, the confinement and solitude, she slipped from the apartment and fled out into the freedom of the night—where, though pursued by guilty fears, she could yet have the liberty so dear to the soul of the true Romany.

Vastly different were the experiences, the thoughts and feelings, of Margaret Crofton, that night!

Nicholas had passed the greater portion of the afternoon with her, and toward him her mind turned constantly. Not a dream visited her of the cloud that lay athwart the pathway of her happiness. All was tinted with roseate hues of pleasure and hope.

Her father had returned early from his business that evening, and now sat with her, speaking of that great coming event: her marriage to Nicholas.

Several days before, Nicholas had gone to him with much fear and trembling, confessed his love for Margaret, related the story of his unhappy youth, and asked her hand in marriage. And it was at the merchant's request that the nuptials had been hastened. A business affair had suddenly arisen requiring him to visit England; and if the young people were to marry he desired it to be before he took his departure, which could not now be long delayed.

"There's only one thing that troubles me in this matter," he was saying. "That is the character of the man who is to become your father-in-law. He's a worthless vagabond and a great scamp. I sent for him this morning, and had an interview with him in my office. Positively, Margaret, I could not consent to be seen on the street with him. How such a man can be the father of a gentleman like Nicholas passes my comprehension. When I think of him I'm even now tempted to withdraw my consent to this proposed union."

"Tut! Tut!" he cried, noticing the gathering tears in her eyes. "Nicholas isn't to blame for it, I know. He didn't have the choosing of his parentage. But the thing carries a blight with it, just the same, and that he cannot escape. And you will be compelled to bear it with him."

"If it wasn't for that, Nicholas is the very man I should have picked for your husband, my dear!"

"I couldn't think of giving him up, no matter what his father may be!" she exclaimed. "I wish it were otherwise, myself. I needn't try to conceal from you, papa, that I can have little respect for Mr. Gregory Bouton. I hope it may never become necessary for me even to meet him."

"Well, we'll think of something else. The matter has gone too far, now, to think of undoing it!" with a sigh. "What about your dresses? I presume they're all that a girl like you could wish?"

"The loveliest things!" she cried, her face lighting. "Let me show them to you. They came this evening. The modiste said she could not possibly get them done before Saturday, but when I told her the great occasion is to be to-morrow night, and that consequently I'd have to go elsewhere, she reconsidered her statement. And so here they are."

She led the way into an adjoining room, and brought the costly garments forth for his inspection, laughing and commenting like an artless child.

And in this unpleasant frame of mind the remainder of the evening was spent, little thinking that Greg, the man they had been so lately discussing, was at the same hour, clucking and chuckling over the vengeance that seemed so near consummation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE absence of Nell, the following day, disturbed Billy Baldor not a little. He dared not question Gran or Greg concerning her, however. That she might again attempt the life of Nicholas seemed likely.

After an uneasy day he once more left the place, telling Gran he was forced to go into town to make some purchases. Greg had already departed, and the crone was in no condition to make effective remonstrance, being confined to her cot with an attack of sudden illness.

In passing the confection store Billy made his customary purchase, and then hurried to effect

the change in his clothing. Anxious to obtain some evidence that would enable him to fasten the crime of murder to Pepper Smith, he visited the house where the skylight misadventure had taken place, believing that to be the cracksman's residence.

He was right in that conjecture; and after a half-hour's waiting had the satisfaction of seeing Pepper and Greg emerge therefrom.

Greg was apparently in a jolly frame of mind, and his coarse jokes reached the spy in his place of concealment. Pepper, on the other hand, maintained his usual morose attitude.

Billy, stealing along at their heels, followed them until they reached and entered the house of the dog fancier. There he halted, fearing to again try the cellar, and scarcely knowing what course to pursue.

There seemed no other way, however, to attain the ends sought; so, after much cautious watching and listening, he approached the cellar door and applied the key.

The bolt flew back, as it had done on a previous occasion, and he found himself in the stench and darkness of the ground dog-kennel, for such it was.

There was a chorus of low and ominous growls as he drew the door to after him, and the greenish flash and glitter of many pairs of savage eyes.

But, these he cared not for, so long as the men in the adjoining apartment were not aroused and warned thereby.

"Here, my good fellows!" he whispered, getting down on his hands and knees, and emitting a series of faint whistles. "Come! Come! I'm your friend, you know! I'm the friend of all dogs!"

The vicious beasts seemed to understand his words, for they flocked about him with clumsy antics and whines of delight.

"That will do!" he commanded, pushing the most boisterous from him. "I just wanted you to know that I'm your friend, you understand, and that therefore you mustn't jump onto me like you do onto other people. Now, you go back to your corners, while I attend to a little business of my own."

All the while he had been fondling them and suffering them to lick his hands and face, seeming to have no more horror of their rough, wet tongue than of the kisses of children.

With much pleased writhing, and wagging of smooth, pointed tails, they obeyed the order; and, as he crept stealthily toward the door, he could see their glowing eyes fixed on him in an affectionate way, and felt that as far as they were concerned he was as safe as if in his own little cot in the tent.

A number of men were in the room adjoining the cellar, and their voices came to him distinctly as he drew near the separating wall. There was an earnestness in the tones, too, and, a lack of boisterousness which revealed, even before he understood a word, that a matter of moment was under discussion.

"An' the weddin's to be to-night?" he heard Kennedy query. "Hadn't we better put this job off, then, till some other time? Be safer, won't it, after the young folks has left?"

The words startled Billy. Then, the note he had left on the desk of the young merchant had not accomplished its intended mission! Such seemed to be the only conclusion to be drawn from the cracksman's statement.

"No!" growled Pepper, apparently anxious to handle the "swag" without needless delay. "We can break in the house while the fandango's goin' on better'n any other time. They's to be a fandango after the weddin', ain't they, Greg?"

"A swell one," said Greg, laughing harshly. "An' you didn't get any invite?" one of the others queried, with much jocularity. "Hittin' the paw of the groom ruther hard, hain't it?"

"Didn't want none!" the Romany averred. "Pleasanter bizness on hand jis' now than runnin' to a swell weddin'. It's dollars I'm after, stead o' fun!"

"Right ye air!" Pepper broke in. "An' le's git down to figgerin' how we're to git them dollars. I 'low you've planned it all out, Greg?"

"Yes; purty much. We're to wait till the fandango is good under way. The house 'll be full o' people, a-dancin' an' a-talkin'. Yes, an' a-eatin'! Fer dinner, er lunch, er whatever they calls it, 'll be served right along at the same time. Sort of a free blow-out, you understand. An' that air'll keep the waiters an' servants so blamed busy they can't look after ner think of anything else."

"I know where the money is, too. I hain't been snoopin' 'roun' there with my eyes shet, I tell you. The ole man fetched the gal a thou-

sand dollars this evenin' an' tole her she was to do as she pleased with it. An' she put it in a little drawer. And they was more things in that drawer, too. Shiners that'd make these jewelry sharks turn green. One of 'em was a diamond wu'th nigh 'bout a fortune."

"But she'll wear them!" Kennedy protested. "I heerd her say she wouldn't, though!" with a jubilant cluck. "Said she was on'y goin' to wear ribbons an' rosies, er somethin' like that."

"Now, my idee is, fer some of us to sneak in there while the blowout's on, gobble the swag, an' slide. T'other fellers air to be a-layin' near; an' if anything happens they're to come b'lin' in, break the heads o' the servants an' cops—if they should be any of them last—an' then all run fer it. We're dead sure to win, if we work it right!"

Billy had heard enough. He must do something to stop the wedding and prevent the consummation of this villainous plot. Feeling thus, he withdrew to the door, and passed to the street.

The time was, however, most unfortunately chosen. Two members of the burglar band had just arrived and were standing on the steps preparatory to entering, when he emerged from the cellar-way.

With a cry that brought the others tumbling up to their assistance, they gave chase. It was impossible for Billy's short legs to carry him out of danger; and, realizing it, he darted into a coal-hole, drawing the cap in place as he dropped through.

Not knowing where he was, he stumbled blindly forward, and quickly found himself in the cellar from which he had emerged. The dogs bristled and growled, as he entered, but a word stilled them into subjection; and panting and breathless, he crouched on the floor to await the result of the search.

"Lemme lead the way!" he heard the dog fancier say. "We'll drive him into the cellar, and the dogs 'll do him up. He must 'a' been standin' in the cellar stairway. Do you know who it is?"

"Looked like a newsboy er bootblack," one of the men affirmed.

With this, the cap was lifted from the coal hole, and Kennedy dropped through, being quickly followed by others.

He instantly produced a dark lantern, slipped back the slide, and flashed the light over the narrow space.

"Hanged if I don't believe he *is* in the cellar!" he muttered, with much wonderment. "Watch the door, and don't let him git out!"

Billy was in a tremor of fear and suppressed excitement.

A hastily-formed plan of action, however, served to brace and quiet him. Approaching the door, where he knew there were men lying in wait, he slipped the bolt noiselessly.

"Come here, my good fellows!" he whispered to the dogs, which had followed him in a loving way.

The hoarse voice of Kennedy now sounded at the other entrance, and the light of the advancing lantern flashed through.

Delay was no longer possible. Swinging open the door, he pointed a hand up the stairway, gave a low hiss, and the command:

"Take 'em, my boys! Take 'em!"

Instantly the vicious brutes darted by him, growling horribly, and attacked the men who were on the pavement. Howls of rage and pain instantly followed; and amid the confusion Billy darted out and fled up the street.

But he had not gone far when he heard Kennedy swearing at the dogs and beating them off the attacked men; and then rapid footsteps, showing he was again being pursued.

Fearing capture if he continued on, he slipped into a stairway and crouched there in the darkness.

The pursuers, as they passed, flashed a light into the stairway, but failed to see him. At this he was about to creep out and again attempt flight, when the sight of men stationed at intervals along the street, caused him to draw back.

More than an hour of the most intense anxiety was thus passed and it was well on toward midnight before he felt it to be safe to leave his place of concealment.

"The wedding must be over long before this," he groaned, as he made his way cautiously from the dangerous neighborhood. "All I can do, now, if I can do anything, is to prevent the robbery."

Hastening to the confection store, which he feared might be closed for the night, he found the German engaged in putting up the shutters preparatory to retiring.

"Let me tell you your fortune!" Billy truthfully whispered. "In fifteen minutes, if you can, just over there. A big fortune!"

"Vhell!" the man replied, with stoic impassiveness. "Dhot soods me!"

He dropped the shutter into place, with easy carelessness and walked away.

"Takes it cool!" the dwarf muttered, as he also left the place. "I said fifteen minutes; but I don't see how he's going to get any one here in that time."

And then he continued on to the building he had pointed out to the man as the place of rendezvous.

If he had followed the disguised detective he would have seen him stroll carelessly into a building not far away. And once inside, he would have seen every trace of that carelessness vanish. The room entered was apparently unoccupied, but beneath a bundle of old clothes and papers on the floor was a telegraphic instrument; and by means of it Baldor's request was quickly flashed to the office of the chief of police.

A waiting vehicle instantly received six men in ordinary clothing, who were really policemen, well-armed and ready for any desperate encounter with lawless men. And, then at a thundering gait, the vehicle sprang away from the curbing and was whirled in the direction of the tumble-down house near the Gypsy camp.

Within the fifteen minutes the place was reached, and the men stood ready to be guided by and do the bidding of the Gypsy spy.

"Drive within a square of the Crofton place!" Baldor whispered, swinging into the vehicle.

And, while this drive was being made, he explained fully the details of the plot he had heard, supplementing the narration with the statement that Pepper Smith, the murderer of John Fenton, was a member of the burglariously-disposed party.

The flashing of lights and the strains of music, as they left the vehicle and drew near the Crofton residence, showed only too plainly that the revelry was at its highest, and that the marriage of Nicholas and Margaret had been consummated. A despairing sigh escaped the lips of the Pygmy as this terrible truth was forced on him.

Though too late to prevent the marriage, they were not too late to foil the schemes of the would-be robbers of the house. These were caught in their burglarious attempt, and after a bitter fight, in which several heads were broken by police clubs, were captured and marched off in irons. All save Greg, who, with true Romany slipperiness, managed in some manner to evade them and effect his escape.

But before the joy of the occasion had thus been disturbed, Baldor saw—to him a most painful sight—the young bride, radiant in her wedding robes, leaning affectionately upon the arm of her handsome and smiling husband.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE CONFESSION.

THINKING Greg would make for the Gypsy camp and might be captured there if proper precautions were used, Baldor led a portion of the force to that point.

Greg was not there, however, but the visit was fruitful of great results. When the camp was surrounded and Greg's tent entered, Nell and a couple of Gypsy women were bending over the cot on which Gran lay, striving to catch the feeble words that fell from her lips.

The Romany girl was greatly startled at sight of the officers, thinking they had come to arrest her for her attempt on the life of Nicholas. Under this belief she slipped beneath the edge of the tent, as they came in by the entrance, and fled.

"What's the trouble?" Baldor asked, of the women, as he advanced and looked down at the poor creature stretched on the cot.

"She's dyin'!" one of them whispered. "An' she's been tryin' to say somethin' which we can't jis' make out. She was tuck wi' the paralyz 'bout an hour ago. She didn't seem to know nothin' 'til Nell come; an' then she seemed to want to say somethin' to her."

"And we have frightened Nell away!" said Baldor, regretfully.

"Do you know me, Gran?" advancing still nearer, and bending down till his face almost touched hers.

At the words the dying woman looked up, a strange light coming into her failing eyes as she recognized him.

"Yes," she croaked, "it's Billy."

Then the eyes closed and for a time she seemed to be wandering in a sort of misty dreamland. But they opened again, the mut-

things ceased, and she beckoned him to come still closer, apparently not noticing or heeding the strangers who stood in the entrance to the tent.

"I wanted to see you, Billy!" reaching out a thin hand which he clasped in one of his. "I've been a weeked creeter, Billy, an' I c-can't go, tell this is off'n my min'. It's about N-Nick, an' 'bout you. Greg's been plannin' an' plottin' year in an' year out—but Greg never knowed this."

Instinctively the men left the entrance and drew closer to catch the words of the crone.

"No, Greg never knowed. If h-he had, he'd 'a' killed me, I 'low!" gasping and pausing as she endeavored to proceed.

"'Twas y-years an' years ago—when you w-was little, Billy! Greg was put into jail by C-Crofton, an' he swore he'd have his revenge. An'-an'-s-so he stole you, Billy! He thinks 'twas Nick as he took."

The revelation was so astounding that Baldor's head swam and he became sick and giddy.

"It can't be, Gran!" he protested, incredulously.

"Yes, 'twas you, Billy! Greg went away—in a short time—an' lef' you w' me—an' he was gone nigh 'bout a year—trav'lin' w' some other Roms. An' you got out into the streets one day, an' w-was run over by a kerridge. A-an' they tuck ye t-to the horspital—an' said you'd never git well."

"I—I was 'feared o' Greg! S-so I got an'er kid—stole hit f-frum a orphan 'sylum—an' 'en Greg come back I t-to! 'im it was you. But, it wasn't you, Billy! 'T'was Nick."

"An' you got w-well, but never growed much—frum th-the hurt ye got, I 'low—an' I see'd you often. But I didn't never darst tell Greg."

"An' Nick growed up; an' Greg planned to have 'm marry Crofton's gal, b'lievin' she were his sister, s-so's he c'ud have his revenge on the ole man. An' I never darst tell 'im she wasn't his sister. Ner 'bout you, Billy, though I—I rec'nized ye soon's ye come to camp!"

She dropped back, having half lifted herself on an elbow as she approached the conclusion of her narrative, and the shadow of death settled on her face.

"She's going!" thought Baldor, fascinated by the story that had fallen from those compressed lips.

One of the men touched him on the arm to ask him a question, and when he again bent over the cot he saw that Gran was dead.

"Come!" he commanded, leaving the last sad offices to the waiting women and stepping from the tent. "We must go to Crofton's immediately. This thing has set me half wild."

There is no need to follow their steps in detail. When the Crofton residence was reached, to their great surprise they found Greg there, standing in the center of the reception-room—vacated now by all the guests, and occupied only by Crofton, Nicholas and Margaret—and with sublime defiance hurling the thunders of his vengeance at the heads of his astonished and bewildered hearers.

He had expected so defer this satisfaction to a later day, but fearing he would be hounded by the officers of justice and would thus be compelled to fly from the vicinity, he had decided to make the revelations while he had opportunity.

"There they air! Brother an' sister—an' married through my schemin'!" he sneered, as a parting shot.

"Which is a lie!" the dwarf shouted, bounding forward, while at the same time the officers leaped on Greg and pinioned him to the floor. "I have proofs that it's false. And your vengeance, Greg, has over-reached itself and fallen harmless!"

The burglars suffered the penalties of their crimes—Pepper receiving a life sentence for the murder of which he was guilty. Complicity in the crime could not be affixed to Greg, but his other deeds were dark enough to warrant a long incarceration.

What became of the Romany girl, Nell, was never certainly known, though it was the general belief that she had fled to some other Gypsy band, and with them had continued her wild and wandering career.

The shadow cast over the hopes of the young people by the words of Greg naturally vanished when the truth was made known.

And Billy Baldor—true-hearted, honest, tireless and irrepressible—found a father, a sister, and a fortune, by finding himself.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street New York.